

Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke: This Time I'm Gonna Tell Her

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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke

*This Time I'm Gonna ♡
Tell Her How I Feel!*



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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke
This Time I'm Gonna Tell Her How I Feel!



“The Piggy Duke was intelligent, strong, kindhearted, and sadly, too stubborn for his own good. From another perspective, the story of Shuya Marionette can be interpreted as his tragedy.”

—Director of Shuya Marionette

Prologue: Our Past, Our Future

Someone's voice roused me from the comfort of the nap I'd indulged in.

"Jeez, what's with that crybaby, Charlotte?! Who does she think she is?!"

That voice made my heart falter, for some strange reason. I strained my ears to focus, wondering whose voice it was.

"He just left me there... *Me*, his fiancée! If he's going to pamper her all day, then I don't need this stupid ring! Wasn't this meant to be proof that he would put me above everyone else?!"

A girl's voice? I thought, intrigued. *I think I've heard it somewhere before.*

"All right, time to wake up, oink." Whispering to myself, I opened my eyes to an abundance of trees with their canopy of green leaves and a carpet of flowers in full bloom. The smell of nature around me was overwhelming.

Looking around, I found a small, frail girl in the weeds rocking back and forth in a silent staccato. Her impeccable golden blonde hair fell over her trembling shoulders; the mere sight of her was enough to instill a strong urge of protectiveness in just about anyone. Even the forest critters stopped to look at her as they scaled the trunks of nearby trees.

It was none other than Alicia, looking very much like the girl I'd known when we were both young. Between me and Alicia hid a small boy, watching from behind a big tree as Alicia tore at weeds. *So I'm watching my memories from an outside point of view, huh?*

"So this is a dream..." I muttered. It took me recognizing this scenery from a day long past to realize that. I hadn't thought about this memory in a long, long time. I could feel only frustration that I couldn't do anything but watch this remnant of the past play out.

But that was only natural. The past was in the past. Not even the gods could change what had already come to pass.

"It's all his fault too! A 'personal retainer'? What's with that?! I came all this way to meet him, but he's spending all of his time on that crybaby, and we haven't talked at all!"

Ah, I remember now. Right after I assigned Charlotte as my personal retainer, my fiancée came to visit my family's lands for fun. I was reliving

this memory in a dream.

Alicia groaned. “He’s paying attention to her and nobody else... It’s so unfair!”

Charlotte Lily Huzak was once the princess of the now-destroyed kingdom of Huzak, and she was long presumed dead. When I had saved her from a slave auction held on Denning lands, I swore to the enraged Great Spirit of Wind that I would protect her for the rest of my life. As proof of this oath, I assigned her as my personal retainer.

In House Denning, assigning someone as your personal retainer was essentially making a vow to be together forever. My sudden declaration was a bolt from the blue, and House Denning was thrown into chaos because of it. But my mind was set, and I refused to budge. Perhaps thinking that I would eventually change my mind, they granted my request. Either that, or everyone in my family thought that Crybaby Charlotte would give up halfway during the harsh retainer training that House Denning was notorious for.

“You could look at her crossways and she’d cry... Jeez!” Alicia groaned in frustration. “I hate that girl!”

Though my engagement with Alicia was a political arrangement by my family, she was my official fiancée—that much was an indisputable fact. At the time, I had my hands full taking care of the traumatized Charlotte and the Great Spirit of Wind, so I didn’t get the chance to talk with Alicia properly, who had come all the way to my place to get to know me better.

“Oh, there you are. I finally found you, Alicia.” A silhouette approached the still-grumbling Alicia from the shade of the trees.

The voice belonged to a boy with long, black hair tied back in a ponytail. He walked with his hands in the pockets of his crimson coat, the color signifying that he came from House Denning. Sensing that Alicia wasn’t in the best mood, he took one hand from his pocket to gently pat her head.

“What do you think you’re doing, commoner?!” Alicia barked. “Don’t you know whose head you just touched?! Ask permission before acting so familiar with me!”

“Alicia, House Denning is in an uproar over your disappearance. You have to let either myself or Lord Slowe know before going out somewhere, or I won’t hear the end of it.”

“Who cares if some commoner gets scolded?” Alicia huffed. “Whatever. I wanted to ask you something.”

Alicia surged to her feet and swiped at the corners of her eyes, glaring at the boy. *As a kid, Alicia sure was just as headstrong as she is now.*

“Who is that girl?”

“That girl...?” The boy trailed off. “You mean Lord Slowe’s retainer, Charlotte?” Alicia nodded, waiting for his response. “She’s one of the girls Lord Slowe and I saved from the slave auction.”

“I know that much. But why did she become Slowe’s retainer? She’s a commoner, and she doesn’t have much skill with magic, right? And she’s a crybaby too... I can’t believe that *she*, of all people, would become Slowe’s personal retainer. A girl like her can’t fill those shoes; he’s the heir of Duke Denning, after all. The personal retainer of the next duke needs to be much stronger than that, right?”

“I couldn’t tell you,” the boy said at length. “But Lord Slowe made that decision.”

“Slowe chose her...? Why?”

“Who knows? I’d like to know the answer to that myself.” He shrugged. “But if it is Lord Slowe’s wish, I will obey as one half of the Knights of the Twin Wings who serve him. But I can see why you’re upset now, Alicia. You feel as though Charlotte has snatched Lord Slowe away from you, so you’re here sulking by yourself.”

“I-I’m not sulking! At all!” Alicia stammered.

I wanted to stay and watch Alicia a little bit more, but my consciousness was suddenly pulled along by my past self; I had no choice but to follow him through the forest. *Oh well.*

When I blinked, I found myself in my room at the main estate, studying to pass the time amidst towering stacks of books. There were books on local governments, national administration, military tactics and affairs, and even various regional customs. Reliving these studies from my past self’s point of view was just as stifling as I remembered. It was in the middle of this studying that I felt someone’s eyes on me. Looking up, I saw the black-haired boy who’d been talking to Alicia earlier. He leaned against the door and stood there, watching me without a word.

“Oh, it’s you,” I muttered. “If you have something to say, you should say it instead of just standing there.”

“You looked very focused on what you were doing, so I refrained from interrupting.”

“I can’t finish all of this in one day if I don’t focus.” I paused. “In any case, how’s Alicia? Has her mood improved at all since then?”

“I take it you heard everything, milord? You could have come out and talked to us.” Even in my dream, the cheeky boy kept his hands in his coat pockets as he usually did. He sported an impish grin just like when he had spoken to Alicia.

“About that...” I hesitated. “You also have a few words for me about picking Charlotte as my personal retainer.”

“Of course I do. Such a small girl as your personal retainer? As far

as I can tell, she can use a bit of magic, but we're talking about a personal retainer serving *House Denning* here, not any old noble. Don't forget that the people of this country fear the direct descendants of House Denning and their personal retainers as monsters."

I laughed. "I'm a monster, huh?"

"Milord, this is no laughing matter. What in the world were you thinking, choosing her as your personal retainer? Not as a retainer to take care of you, but as the personal retainer to the heir of Duke Denning! Not only is her background unclear, I don't think that girl will stand a chance when it comes to fighting... Honestly, I pity her. There's no way she can endure that position."

"No matter what anyone else says, I'm not budging on this. You're one to talk about being small and young, given how young you are for a knight of House Denning. You're not even a hired mercenary. You're officially one of us, and the youngest person ever to join the ranks of our knights."

"Please don't lump me in with Charlotte. I'm special," he huffed.

I raised a skeptical eyebrow. "You're special, huh?"

"Yes, I am special," he insisted.

"Well..." I shrugged. "I guess that's true. You certainly had to be quite talented to earn my father's approval."

The boy grinned wider at that, placing a hand onto the hilt of the sword fastened to his waist. He was already dashing enough as it was; this sort of gesture only added to that demeanor. *He's got the confidence to just boldly declare that he's special. Honestly, that's one of the amazing things about him*, I thought.

It was by pure chance that I had met this boy with such potential, and I turned him from a normal commoner into a knight loyal only to House Denning. Even by the merit of his skill with the sword alone, the boy far outmatched the noble knights hired by my family to supplement the knights under our direct patronage.

He sighed. "I really don't know why you would make Charlotte your personal retainer, but you ignored all of our protests and insisted only she could take up the post. I will put my faith in you and believe that she is someone special, then."

"Yes, Charlotte is special," I said with a nod. "In truth, I want to keep an eye on her all the time, but... Unfortunately, I cannot do that due to my position. And so I ask this of you. When she is out of my sight—"

His black hair, his black eyes, and the abundance of confidence in those eyes that saw right through me... It was all so nostalgic. Before I knew it, he had left House Denning far behind... He was one of my regrets from the past.

He was once a good companion of mine, and back then, I could

talk to him about anything. But...I couldn't tell him the truth about Charlotte. I never did.

What are you doing now, I wonder? Are you roaming free again somewhere in this country?

“—protect her for me, Silva.” I reached out my hands towards one half of my Twin Wings, my handpicked knights, and then—

“A dream... Just like I thought.” I opened my eyes to the real world.

There was no smell of plants nor bright light in the open room. Even if I reached my hands towards the ceiling, my hands would grasp at nothing. I frowned at the morning sun seeping through the curtains. I stretched and slowly climbed out of bed, walking towards the spot I frequented most often nowadays.

My vision slowly focused as I blinked my eyes a few more times. There, I saw—

“I really *am* fat.”

—my own figure reflected in the mirror.

The dining hall was always packed in the morning, what with the many hungry mouths of the school it served and all. The sound of silver cutlery clinking echoed throughout the hall, and scrumptious food that wouldn't be seen normally in a commoner's home was lined up on the many rows of long tables.

“Hey, please get out of the way! Oh, apologies, milord!”

Maids hustled and bustled about the hall. After studying in this school for nearly a year, this scenery had become the norm to us students. Even if some kids showed up to the dining hall with bed hair, few students would actually make a comment on it.

“—Lord Denning, are you okay? You were staring into space,” the black-haired girl sitting by my side called out to me. Apparently I'd zoned out, but I snapped out of it.

“I had a really nostalgic dream this morning,” I said. “I was reminiscing a little.”

“Even *you* would think back on the past, huh? I thought you'd be someone who only looked to the future.”

“Well... I guess I've been like that since I met you, Tina, yeah.”

Back then, every single day was filled with happiness. While I worked on bettering myself as a member of House Denning, I had the privilege of seeing Charlotte grow and improve as my retainer. I used to think those halcyon days would last forever.

“By the way, Tina.” I hesitated. “What is this?”

A spread of food covered the whole table, plates crammed in on every inch of available surface. *Even if I have a big appetite, I could*

never eat this much! I protested inwardly. *Though I finally fit into the largest ready-made size uniform, I'm still in the middle of my diet!*

"This happened while you were distracted. Several people came over, saying that they weren't hungry and would like you to have it in their stead. You became a celebrity overnight after you caught that mercenary, uh, No-What's-Her-Face. In a good way this time!"

"I see." I nodded. "I'm still on a diet, though..."

This first-year commoner student was the first lady friend I'd made after I had changed for the better.

"They're trying desperately to get on your good side. They probably finally realized that even though you're a little chubby, you're still from *the* House Denning."

She was a role model student who had managed to use earth magic despite being a commoner. This extremely diligent girl was a side character who hadn't been interested in joining Shuya or his harem at all in the anime. As for her appearance, well... Just putting it out there—since I couldn't exactly avoid this topic when it came to her—but she had quite the voluptuous chest. Tina was one of my few friends, and she treated me no differently than before, even after the incident with the mercenary.

"They're trying to get on my good side, I see, oink," I snickered.

"Oh, you seem pretty pleased by that. So what are you going to do with these offerings, then? Are you going to eat them?"

"Well..." I hesitated. *It's a gift, so I shouldn't waste it... It's fine if I just have a little bit, right? If I don't, it would be rude...right?* I gulped. *J-Just a little bit...* Giving into the devil on my shoulder whispering in my ear, I reached for a sandwich, when—

"Oops! Sorry!" A familiar voice rang out.

I turned to find a girl with a slim figure and long, straight, silver hair standing there, wearing an apron over the top of her dress. A noble student stood beside her, chastising her.

"You there!" the boy shouted. "My uniform is drenched! What are you going to do about it?!"

"S-Sorry!" she apologized, gesturing frantically. "I'll send it to the laundry straight away, so please take off your clothes at once! If we take it there right now, we should make it in time for the morning batch! Come on!" Flustered, the maid started pulling at the boy's clothes.

"Huh?! Hey, cut it out!" the boy protested.

Though there were many maids with the same uniform in the dining hall, she stood out with her noble and serene aura despite her clumsy nature. Her skin glowed snow-white under the light, captivating everyone around her. None of the male students in the dining hall could take their eyes off of her.

“If you don’t wash it right away, it will stain! Please strip! Quickly!”

“I-I am a noble, I could never take off my clothes in public! Don’t worry about me! I’ll take this to the laundry myself later, so leave me alone! Wha—! Let go of me!”

Indeed, it was my personal retainer, Charlotte, who was trying desperately to get the noble to strip out of his uniform to clean it.

“Miss Charlotte is pretty as always,” Tina whispered next to me, a tinge of longing in her voice. “Plus, her clumsiness only adds to her charm, don’t you agree? The noble she’s talking to doesn’t actually look that angry at her...” Tina sighed. “Pretty people sure have it easy...”

Like Tina said, the boy who Charlotte was bickering with didn’t actually look angry; instead, a red flush bloomed across his cheeks.

“Oink...” I muttered, thinking back on the evening I caught the mercenary who infiltrated Kirsch Mage Institute, my school. That day, I couldn’t help myself and had said something embarrassing, swearing that, “No matter what happens, I will protect you.”

But Charlotte must have misunderstood it as a vow to protect her as my retainer, so it was hard to tell whether we had gotten any closer than before, even just a little.

I only had to say one sentence to truly convey my feelings: I love you. I just needed to release this sentence from the many locks I hid it behind, but these three words held so much weight. The moment they reached my throat, they withered and died and sank right back down into my stomach.

The Piggy Duke of the anime never managed to say this one sentence. *It might be just one sentence, but...* I sighed inwardly. *It might as well be a gigantic wall for me.*

“One moment, you’re spacing out, and the next, you look all dejected,” Tina said. “Did something happen? You aren’t making good progress on your breakfast either.”

“I’m a complicated person...” I sighed. “Aaah, I’m so pathetic!”

“Don’t say that. I heard that you were super cool when you had your showdown with the evil mercenary. You’re not pathetic at all!”

“No, you’re wrong!” I wailed. “I’m a pathetic pig who doesn’t have a shred of courage! Oiiiink!” I grabbed at my hair and face-planted onto the table in despair.

Tina said nothing for a while. “A noble like you from the mighty House Denning has a lot of worries I could never imagine, I suppose. Oh, did you get any rewards from the school for capturing the mercenary? Money, for example?”

I shook my head with my forehead still glued to the long table.

I had gotten a bunch of different reactions from people after that

incident with the mercenary. The headmaster straight up praised me for my efforts. The Flower Knight Oliver, who was supposed to be the one to capture the mercenary, scolded me for doing something so reckless. Professor Loco Moco was appalled and slightly exasperated with me, saying, “Ya really *did* put on an act! I knew it!” Shuya sometimes glared at me for no reason now, and he started showing more animosity towards me than before. Those were the major reactions after I caught her. Other than the occasional offerings of food from people like earlier, I guess.

“Hey, can I ask you something strange?”

“Something strange?” Tina hesitated. “That depends. What is it?”

“Uh, have you... Have you ever fallen in love before, Tina?” She was a city girl. Surely she had a decent amount of experience with romance, unlike me.

“Lord Denning,” Tina said at length. “Are you so distracted because you have a crush on someone?!”

“Wha— Shush!” I hissed in panic. “Please be quiet, I’m begging you, *please* be quiet... I’m just talking about what-ifs here!”

Tina stared at me with skeptical eyes. “Something smells fishy... In any case, hmm... I’ve been too busy helping out with the family business since I was young to have the time to think about romance. Even after coming here, I barely scrape by the skin of my teeth, so I need to study hard to keep up...” Tina groaned. “Ugh, I’m so jealous of the nobles who can just play around without a care in the world!”

Then, Tina started talking about the hardships she experienced in her family—about her mother, the innkeeper, and how she was ruthless with her demands. Tina said that the maids were paid quite handsomely in this school, which surprised her, so she wanted to work here someday. She also mentioned that after she unlocked her magic, she had to study several times as much as she did before.

I listened to Tina talk while I demolished my breakfast. Sometimes, I showed my surprise, while at other times I nodded in agreement.

Well... I’ll work something out eventually. Unlike the blackhearted Piggy Duke, I had plenty of time. I could slowly figure out my relationship with Charlotte from now on, one step at a time.

“Apologies for interrupting your deep contemplation, Lord Slowe, but would you like me to take away all this extra breakfast?”

“Huh?” I paused. “Oh, thanks, Lord Pauper. I’m still on a diet, so that would be great.”

“I’m just doing my job,” he replied. Then, after a short pause, he added, “Also, could you seriously stop calling me that?”

A blond waiter refilled my empty teacup and started taking away the offerings that people had left for me. This was Lord Pauper, a

noble student whose real name was Valjean Greatlorde. It might be strange to fathom the heir of an earl house working part-time, but there was a reason for that: he was dirt poor. Though he looked the part of the stereotypical noble, he was so poor that he wore socks with holes in them. He had even moved from the third-floor noble rooms to the first-floor commoner rooms in the boys' dorm to save money, a rarity among the upper class.

"Hey you! Why are you taking away my plate without permission?! I'm still eating! Are you implying that I should eat less because I'm a little chubby?!" a girl snapped.

"N-N-Not at all!" Charlotte exclaimed. "That's not the case! I would never think that!"

Charlotte must've stirred up trouble again. *She's as careless as ever, huh?* I felt a smile creep up onto my lips.

"Lord Slowe, staring at your retainer is good and all, but—" Valjean began.

"I-I wasn't staring at Charlotte! Not at all!"

"—you have a guest."

"Huh? A guest?" I turned around at Lord Pauper's words to find the main heroine of the popular anime *Shuya Marionette* standing there, her lips pulled back into a thin, straight line. Her smooth skin was dewy; her peach-pink lips were soft and full. She was more glamorous than any other student in our year in Kirsch, but her figure was delicate and frail in contrast. This only added to her adorable beauty.

I was stunned silent for a long moment. "Alicia?"

I hadn't interacted with her at all since the incident where she'd been nearly kidnapped. Immediately after the incident, Alicia thanked me for coming to her rescue, but that was it. I thought that our oil-and-water relationship would see a little bit of improvement, but the chasm between us yawned on. Even something as major as saving her life didn't so much as begin to bridge the gap.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Lord Denning and the princess of Cirquista..." Tina squeaked. "Everyone's looking at us..."

Just as Tina said, a dead silence fell over the dining hall. Me, a direct descendant of House Denning, one of the most powerful noble houses in all of Daryth, and Alicia, the second princess of an allied country of equal standing to ours. Everyone in the school knew that we were once engaged, and so of course we attracted attention whenever our paths crossed.

Alicia disliked this attention, and she was meticulous about keeping me at arm's length when I'd been the blackhearted Piggy Duke. *So why is she talking to me now?*

“Piggy Slowe,” she declared.

“What?”

“Follow me.”

I knew very well that Alicia was the greatest troublemaker in *Shuya Marionette*. Most of the events in the anime started because of her outlandish actions.

Something big was about to happen. I was sure of it.



Chapter 1: A Gift from the Cardinal

“Phew... So you wanted to bring me *here*, huh?”

Alicia panted between her words. “I didn’t bring you here because I wanted to... Ugh, let me catch my breath... Phew... Finally, I’m okay now... Why on earth did you start running up the stairs all of a sudden?! You really surprised me!”

“For me, flights of stairs are opportunities for weight loss,” I explained. “That being said, you’re really out of shape.”

“Unlike you, I’m not exercising to lose weight! Besides, mages don’t need to be fit to cast magic!” Alicia huffed indignantly, then sighed. “Whatever. If I keep talking to you, I’ll be infected with the ‘idiot’ disease too...”

I’d had a feeling when I’d followed Alicia into the staff building that we’d end up at the headmaster’s office, and sure enough, here we were. It seemed that my intuition was on point.

Rays of morning light filtered into the room not unlike a botanical garden. The headmaster sat at his desk scrutinizing a piece of paper, holding it up to the light to get a clearer look.

“I didn’t think I’d come to this room a second time. If the other students heard about this, they’d be pretty jealous,” I muttered.

“A second time? What do you mean?” Alicia said at length, a slight hint of suspicion in her tone.

“Ah, don’t worry about it. I was just talking to myself.”

Why did the headmaster have Alicia bring me here, though? Did something happen to the mercenary I caught the other day?

Alicia didn’t seem fazed at all. She showed her unreserved displeasure, probably thinking something along the lines of, “Why did I have to bring him here?”

Hey, why is she standing so far away from me? Is she that averse to being near me?

“Slowe, are visits to my office that unusual?” the headmaster asked.

Oops. I hadn’t meant for him to hear me. Nothing for it but to be honest, then.

“Yes, sir. Among the students, it is rumored that you only summon students to this office to give them recommendations to become Royal Knights or job offers in the palace after graduation. Well, I mean, I only heard of this recently, so I don’t know the details.”

"Wait, really?" Alicia was surprised.

"You're an international student, so it doesn't apply to you," I muttered.

"Well now, that is quite the rumor. Who started it, I wonder?" The headmaster stroked his white beard. "It is not far from the truth. There have been such cases in the past. I have only recommended one such student to the Order, though... They were a very remarkable student, indeed." The headmaster paused. "To this day, I still question whether I made the right choice back then. The question remains on my mind each and every day," the headmaster said, reminiscing. The corners of his eyes softened, melancholy clear in his tone.

The headmaster changed the topic with a shake of his head. "Thank you for bringing him here, Alicia. Now, you two were both involved in the incident, so I wished to inform you that the mercenary was escorted to Daryth City without any issues. These events stressed you greatly, Alicia, and I would like to apologize to you as the headmaster for failing to protect you. I am truly sorry."

Alicia breathed out a relieved sigh. "Please do not worry about it. It is in the past."

Alicia's pretty unlucky, witnessing the mercenary just as she was fiddling with her magic circle. She must've had her heart in her throat the whole time while the mercenary held her at wandpoint..

"Slowe, people have likely changed how they treat you after you caught the mercenary. Is this the case?"

I hesitated. "I also thought people would change, but I guess I'm still difficult to approach."

In the end, nobody tried to talk to me directly after the incident with the mercenary. Most of the students kept their distance, observing my every action from afar like they did this morning in the dining hall.

"But, well... People started paying attention to me in the sense that even the rotten apple doesn't fall far from the tree. In my case, that tree being House Denning. I've crossed too many lines up to this point, so honestly, this is enough for me. I plan on continuing to slowly return to my true self from now on."

"Nothing can change the fact that you are a Denning, I see... That is what they think of you. However, even the majority of the most powerful members of House Denning would have struggled to defeat that mercenary single-handedly. Even the boy I recommended for the Order wouldn't have been able to do so alone. Alicia, you would know that since you faced No Face personally. You saw firsthand how powerful of a mage and how formidable an opponent she was. I can count on one hand the number of mages in the world who can cast the darkness spell for disguises with such ease as she did."

“Well... Yes, all of that is true, but *this* guy was the absolute worst before this happened.” She made a gesture towards me with a jerk of her hand. “So it’s hard... I can’t change the way I feel about him overnight, just because of this one incident. If I had to guess, I’d say that’s why people aren’t talking to him directly. They probably feel the same way as I do,” Alicia said.

“I see. Slowe, it seems that your accomplishment was so out of the ordinary that people still have not quite come to terms with it. However, have you heard? There is speculation in the palace that the Prodigy of Wind has returned, although admittedly such speculation is met with some small degree of skepticism.”

The Prodigy of Wind. That was the title bestowed upon me before I turned into the self-indulgent, blackhearted Piggy Duke. It was a relic of my childhood, back from the days before I threw everything away. *Ugh, just the sound of it makes me cringe.* Goosebumps spread down my arms and neck at the mere thought.

“Headmaster,” I said slowly. “What did you want with me today? I don’t think this is just about the mercenary.” There was no way that he had called me here just to praise me for my deeds. Especially since he specifically had Alicia bring me here, I could only assume whatever the headmaster wanted to discuss must’ve involved her.

I thought back on the last time I visited this room. He had talked about a variety of things with Shuya and me that day before finally getting around to the topic and telling us about the mole in the school. But it was different this time.

This time, the headmaster wasted no time telling us the truth: there was a dungeon discovered in the Lost Woods outside of campus.

“The army is in charge of scouting the vicinity of the school...” I trailed off. “It’s a blunder on my family’s—on House Denning’s part.”

“That is not necessarily the case. Knowing that a dangerous mercenary had infiltrated our school, the professors volunteered to scout the forest outside the campus to be certain nothing else lurked nearby, and it was then that they discovered the dungeon by chance. The forest outside this campus is very large. It is hard to lay blame for not finding a dungeon in such an enormous area solely at the feet of House Denning.”

Outside Kirsch Mage Institute, there was a vast, dense forest known as the Lost Woods. It was said that if someone went deep enough into the forest, it would be impossible for them to find their way out. Monsters lived in the forest; sometimes, because of that, the school would use the woods for classes in order to train with lesser creatures. The military on the other hand, under the command of House Denning, would periodically hunt down the monsters so that

they wouldn't invade the school.

And now, a new dungeon was discovered in the Lost Woods. Humans ruled the realm of the surface and all that the light touched, while monsters dwelt deep underground in their dungeon lairs.

"I can easily imagine that in the palace, people like Cardinal Maldini would be quick to do just that," I said. "Lay blame at the feet of House Denning, I mean."

"I cannot deny that is a distinct possibility. But he could also be a little grateful for the opportunity this grants him. After all—"

The discovery of the dungeon wasn't everything that the headmaster wanted to tell me. There was more.

"They intend to use the dungeon for the selection of the Guardian Knight, huh...? When I came here, I wasn't expecting to hear confidential information about Daryth's royal family," I muttered.

"The cardinal has full control over the Guardian Selection. From what I understand, he had been looking for an appropriate place to hold a trial for quite some time. I do not know what exactly they plan to do in the dungeon, but I hear that Princess Carina will come to Kirsch since the trial will involve her. It sounds like it will be quite the spectacle. The princess might even interact with students while the trials are underway," the headmaster added.

The Guardian Knights were those few elite soldiers assigned either directly to the queen herself or to a crown princess. The current reigning queen and her sword, the Guardian Knight Rudolf, had a relationship like Charlotte and I had. The loyal Guardian Knight was expected to put the safety of their master above their own happiness, and to spend the rest of their life for their master's sake. A Guardian Knight was *the* most honorable and respected position one could achieve in this country outside of the royal family itself. Only the best of the best among the Order of Royal Knights could earn this title.

Because of the critical nature of the role and how it could make or break the future of this country, information about the trial to select a Guardian Knight for Princess Carina was strictly confidential...and yet Alicia didn't seem fazed by this information in the slightest. *Well damn. She must have known about this beforehand.*

"Princess Carina, coming to this school? Everyone would be overjoyed," I said.

"Princess Carina deeply detests leaving the palace. That is probably why the cardinal picked Kirsch. I would hazard a guess that he wanted to give her a chance to interact with those more her age out of compassion for her."

Her Highness, Princess Carina Little Daryth, was the heir to the throne. The anime only mentioned her name in passing, and there had

been no information about her appearance at all. However, being born and raised in this world, I had clear memories of her. My impression of her was something like this: She had soft, slightly wavy golden hair. Her chest was *quite* the sight. She was a perfectionist and a hermit, but she actually didn't have any ambition whatsoever. I could go on.

"May I ask why I was summoned here, then? That, and why does Alicia know about the dungeon and the Guardian Selection too? I would think this is information one would normally refrain from discussing around someone from another country."

"Right now, preliminary trials for the Guardian Selection are being held in a few places across the country, and Royal Knights who put their name forward are participating. One of these trials is being held in Yoram, which, as you know, is not far from our school."

Up until now, Alicia had held an air of indifference. The moment she heard this, however, she went very still, as if something piqued her interest.

"One of the Royal Knights in Yoram requested an audience with Alicia. They wish to greet her, as I understand it, since she attracted attention due to the incident with the mercenary."

"A Royal Knight went out of their way to request an audience with Alicia...?" I was stunned.

"Indeed. A Guardian Knight must meet with major world leaders much more often compared to ordinary Royal Knights. Though such a request is a bit hasty in my opinion, Alicia must make the decision on her own. It is not mine to make on her behalf."

Finally, I understood why Alicia was present. "Wait, did you actually...?" I stared at her.

Alicia harrumphed. "So what? It's none of your business what I do."

"That's true, but..." *She absolutely loathes troublesome things like granting people a formal audience, so why would she go through with this?*

On top of that, it wasn't the royal family of Daryth but a Royal Knight who made the request. She had no reason to accept.

"Slowe, Alicia was quick to accept the request. I had hoped she would reconsider, but it appears her mind is set."

Despite all the reasons not to, Alicia was determined to head to Yoram like the headmaster said. I watched her. *Something's not quite right... There's no way "Her Highness" Alicia would accept such a meet-and-greet. It'd be way too much trouble. There's more to this than either of them are letting on.*

"Headmaster Morozov, what exactly are the Royal Knights at Yoram expected to do for this trial?" I clearly saw Alicia freeze the moment the words left my mouth.

"Slowe, have you ever heard of the name 'Borguie'?"

“...That’s the rogue mage who murdered a member of the royal family in Cirquista. Are you saying that—”

“There is word of a bandit group hiding in Yoram. Some few Royal Knights are tasked with eliminating this bandit group as part of the trials for the Guardian Selection, and we’ve received information that the Cirquistan criminal Borguie is among the bandits’ number.”

So that’s why Alicia accepted the request.

A few years ago, an incident occurred in Alicia’s home country of Cirquista.

There was a...quirky member of the Cirquistan royal family who chose to live in seclusion rather than in the royal palace. A group of bandits broke into their secret abode to steal the valuables there, expecting the owner to be away that day. However, the owner of the house was actually present, and of course they fought back with wand in hand against the intruders. After a battle of spells, they were slain by Borguie’s hand.

“The bandits responsible for the murder escaped the persistent search of the Cirquistan military led by the Knights of the Lake and managed to weasel their way into Daryth. It was the Cirquistan military who informed us about this bandit group’s whereabouts, apparently,” said the headmaster, his voice grave.

I peeked over at Alicia. She looked determined.

Borguie wasn’t as important an enemy as No Face, at least not in the anime. They had accepted a contract from Dustour for the pay and they were one of the villains who Shuya and his comrades ended up fighting. However, once Alicia had laid eyes on Borguie, she lost her cool and challenged them without a second thought to the consequences. If Shuya hadn’t been there to back her up, she would have met a cruel end.

“Headmaster, isn’t this a problem the Daryth military should see to?”

“The cardinal pulled some strings so that the matter fell under his jurisdiction and not that of House Denning. In other words, the Royal Knights were sent to take care of it instead of Daryth’s army. The Royal Knights in Yoram are probably quite eager to catch them too, if it means a better chance of becoming a Guardian Knight.”

“I hear that Borguie and his group still hold a grudge against the royal family of Cirquista. Letting Alicia go to Yoram where they’re holed up is...” I trailed off.

“Are you worried about her?” the headmaster asked.

“I wouldn’t say worried... It’s more that I think this decision isn’t like you, Headmaster. I mean, you’re always focused on keeping us safe and all.”

It wasn't like the headmaster at all. He usually placed student safety above all else.

Alicia, who had been growing restless the entire conversation, clicked her tongue in displeasure. "Headmaster! Why are you telling the pig all this? He has nothing to do with this! Nothing!"

Well, yeah. This request for an audience from a Royal Knight is Alicia's problem. I don't see where I come in. Not to mention that the Guardian Selection is a very important event that will determine this country's future. I'm just a student. This has nothing to do with me. Not to mention I'm still from House Denning, disgrace though I am to them. House Denning and the Order of Royal Knights struggle to cooperate because their Royal Knight Commander, Cardinal Maldini, doesn't get along with my father at all.

"That's not true at all, Alicia. He is very much an important player in this."

Alicia hesitated. "What do you mean?"

The headmaster has already thanked me several times over for the whole mercenary thing, so why am I here? I wondered.

"Slowe," the headmaster addressed me gravely. "Please brace yourself, and listen carefully to what I have to say."

The headmaster picked up the piece of paper he had left on the table earlier and handed it out to me. "This letter is addressed to you from the cardinal... He formally requests that you participate in the Guardian Selection."

"—Huh?" I croaked.

A request to participate in the Guardian Selection? For whom? Me, from *House Denning*?

No way, I thought. That's silly.

The Guardian Knight would represent this country alongside the royal heir they were assigned to protect. As such, they were *always* chosen from among the ranks of the Order.

Me, attending a trial to become such an honorable knight? *Me?*

Just a little while ago, I was slandered as the Fallen Wind and an orc-to-be. People compared me to a monster—I was so scorned. The cardinal himself choosing me? Hold on, that's ridiculous.

"A request for Piggy Slowe to participate in the Guardian Selection?! Th-That's impossible! H-He... He's a pig! And a Denning!" Alicia stammered. "There's no way someone from House Denning could become a member of the Order!" Although Alicia had mostly held her tongue up to this point, the bombshell the headmaster just dropped was too much for her to ignore.

"Headmaster, Alicia's right. Well, right about one thing, at least... Even if I'm a disgrace, I'm still from House Denning, the Order's

biggest rival. Are you sure this isn't some kind of misunderstanding?" I asked.

House Denning always butted heads with the Order. The Order and the cardinal who led them placed the royal family on a pedestal and put their interests above that of all of Daryth's citizens, while House Denning valued the peace and prosperity of the people above all else. This difference in values was the root of the conflict between the two powers.

Because of the looming threat of the Dustour Empire in the northern half of the continent, House Denning requested reinforcements from the Royal Knights to be sent to the front lines. Cardinal Maldini, the Royal Knight Commander, flat out refused. Due to this, tension was high between the two, and one could talk all day about their animosity towards each other.

I couldn't imagine them sending a request for me, *a Denning*, to participate in the trials to become a Royal Knight. A *Guardian Knight*, no less.

"No, there is no mistake. I also could not help but question my ears when I first heard of the request, but...have a look. The official seal of the royal family is stamped on the parchment. I have checked it countless times. If you are still doubtful, see for yourself."

The headmaster released the paper to allow it to flutter in the air, and I quickly sprinted over to the desk to catch it. That was definitely the seal of the royal family stamped onto the letter. There were no two ways about it: this was the real deal.

"So...this isn't a joke." It wasn't a question.

"Indeed. This is an official request from the main branch of the royal family themselves. The royal family and the cardinal were very impressed by your accomplishment of capturing the mercenary. They likely surmised they stood to gain more by taking you under their wing, even if it meant further conflict with your father."

Seriously? I didn't think that defeating No Face would lead to political consequences.

"Kirsch has decided to remain a neutral party in this. My apologies, Slowe, but we cannot turn down an official request from the royal family. I cannot take a side between House Denning and the Order."

"That's..." I trailed off. "It can't be helped. The cardinal's order is equal to the will of the royal family. Nobody in this country can go against that."

"We need to keep this under wraps. However, it probably won't be long before your father finds out that the cardinal sent you a letter."

Ah, so House Denning doesn't know about this request right now, huh?

I was just a student. I couldn't decline a request sent directly to me from the royal family.

"Now then, Alicia. I have given you a few days to reconsider the matter, but are you still adamant on heading to Yoram?"

Alicia nodded firmly at the headmaster's question.

"It will be dangerous, especially for you, since you're a member of the royal family in Cirquista," he warned. "The bandit Borguie and his fellows have a strong grudge against you all."

"I'm well aware, but it's silly to think I would pass this opportunity up. This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to take revenge for my relative. If the culprit is there, then I will capture them with my own two hands. Please don't forget that I am a mage too!" Alicia's gaze was sharp and determined. Once the main heroine set her mind on something, nothing would dissuade her from carrying it out.

Even if Alicia claimed that all she would do in Yoram was grant the Royal Knight their audience, knowing her, she probably had no intention of coming back to the school until the bandits were taken care of. *She's putting herself in a lot of danger. The headmaster looks worried too, staring at her like that.*

"Well then, Slowe, I think you need time to consider it too, but..."

I see... So that's how it is. The headmaster didn't have to say it out loud. I understood what he meant. The headmaster was worried about how eager Alicia was. That was why he called me together with her, so that I could see how precarious her situation was for myself.

I sighed inwardly. *Might as well. I probably can't decline the request from the cardinal anyway.* "Headmaster, I'll go with her."

Oh well. It can't be helped. But I guess I'll play along just a bit... Taking the Guardian Selection would seriously be problematic as a Denning. But secretly watching over Alicia so that she doesn't get into too much trouble in Yoram would be fine, right?

Ever since Professor Loco Moco took over, Magic Studies was filled with chaos.

This was all because the man standing at the lecturer's podium wasn't exactly the best fit for the job. His signature untamed curly hair and black shirt stuck out like a sore thumb as he rambled on about his unique theories on magic, making animated gestures all the while.

"Huh?" said the professor, incredulous. "The heck is with this curriculum? Wait, this old textbook is doin' more than collectin' dust? Professor Arle's too old-fashioned... Oh, that's right. She wasn't actually a professor. Jeez, that No Face... Why did she teach like a Goody Two-shoes? And you lot! How did none of you students realize she was a crook? Did none of y'all realize that somethin' was off in her class?! She wasn't even a noble!"

Everyone had been excited to see how Professor Loco Moco would

teach Magic Studies when it was announced he'd be taking over the subject. Since he also taught Practical Magic, the students expected to learn about practical applications of magic and not just textbook theory. It only took a few classes before that expectation was shattered...and the students were beginning to get fed up.

"Listen here, kiddos. You improve at magic by challengin' yourself. Memorizin' the textbook from cover to cover won't do you no good. Theory just don't hold a candle to experience. That's just how it is," the professor barked. "All right, kiddos, put away your textbooks. We won't be needin' them."

The professor completely ignored the Magic Studies curriculum entirely... I almost had to admire his boldness. People even started saying that No Face—disguised as Professor Arle—had taught lessons in a more proper fashion than he was.

"When I went here, nobody read textbooks or anythin' of the sort. We let our fists do the talkin' from sunup to sundown, every single day. That's how I became a Royal Knight, you see, and—"

I sat in my usual spot in the middle of the top row, watching the professor make a fool of himself. *Annnd he's rambling on and on about himself again. I won't deny that hearing about his adventures was awe-inspiring the first time... His experiences from his adventurer days, and from when he became a Royal Knight...* It got old pretty quick after listening to it for the hundredth time, though.

Disgruntled students leaned on their hands, planting their elbows on their desks.

Something hit my cheek out of nowhere. "Huh?" *What the heck was that?*

"What's with that noise you just made, Denning?" the professor asked.

"Nothing, it's nothing."

The professor paused only for a moment before he turned back to the class. "I'm just puttin' this out there, but I totally coulda caught No Face, no sweat," he grumbled. "Right, okay, lemme tell y'all about back when I was an adventurer in the Adventurers' Guilds. Back then, they called me The Earthcracker, and..."

The professor's words faded to background noise as I frowned down at the thing that had hit me. "What's this? A scrap of paper...?" I looked around. "Oh, it's *her*..."

Of course Alicia would be petty enough to throw things at me. Normally she sat with her buddy, Shuya, but for some bizarre reason she chose to sit at the end of my row today. Honestly, it was the strangest thing I had seen for a while.

I turned to the side to look at her. She stared right at me with her large, doe-like eyes, her lips moving silently in what I could only guess

was the chant for a spell. *Looks like she was the culprit after all.*

I did my best to ignore her, but it was hard when she kept pelting me with paper balls. *Ow!* I sighed, relenting and unraveling the last piece of paper that hit me. “The hell could she want...?” Written on the paper in a rounded scrawl was: “*Why did you accept?*”

“Look, I’m not tryin’ to tell ya kiddos you’re wrong or anythin’. Just that your last teacher did you no favors, makin’ you waste time with hittin’ the books instead of each other.” The professor paused, thinking. “Oh, here’s an idea. Newkern, you’d understand why this topic is so important. You’re registered with the Adventurers’ Guilds after all, aren’t ya?”

The professor’s lecture went in one ear and out the other; my mind was already drifting back to the request I’d gotten from the cardinal. Sure, the piece of goat-skin parchment the headmaster had given me requested my participation in the Guardian Selection, but it didn’t give me anything else to go off of. No reasoning, no further explanation, nothing.

I didn’t know what the royal family wanted from me, but I accepted the request in the end. Apparently Alicia hadn’t seen this life-changing decision coming. *Wait, does she think I’d ignore an order from the royal family themselves? Seriously?*

“P-Professor, what are you talking about? I-I have absolutely *no idea* what you mean! Seriously! I swear!” Anyone with eyes could see right through Shuya’s unconvincing protests.

“Shuya Newkern. You registered as an adventurer three years ago, and you hold the rank of Pallor Demon.” Here, the professor decided to clarify. “Oh, right. Uh, *Demon* is used in the guild to indicate your rank...but most of you were brought up in noble houses, so you probably have no idea what the official titles are, huh? Hmm, what about D Rank? Does that ring a bell? Basically, Newkern can hold his own as an adventurer. He’s not half bad. Doesn’t look like he’s cleared any dungeons, though.”

“H-Huuuh?!” Shuya shouted. “Hey, wait a minute! How do you know all of this, Professor?! I’ve never told anyone about that!”

“Us professors have access to any document submitted to the school, ya know, not just Newkern’s. Keep that in mind.”

“That’s an invasion of privacy! An abuse of authority!” Shuya exclaimed.

“He might not look it, but Newkern’s a good kid who’s got a whole lotta motivation to improve.” The professor turned to address Shuya directly. “That’s why you’ll be getting special training from yours truly. Up you get, Newkern. C’mere.”

The redhead—Shuya Newkern—was the protagonist of the anime *Shuya Marionette*. This so-called protagonist was a hot-blooded mage

with a high affinity for fire magic, and you could usually find him not far from Alicia's side. But her eyes were on me, not Shuya, and she threw another wad of paper at me. I guess I should have expected the demand: "*Answer me now!*"

"Hm, Greatlorde. You'll do nicely. Pair up with Newkern here," said the professor.

"Hold on a second, please!" Valjean exclaimed. "Why do I have to be *Newkern's* partner?!"

"You two fight like cats and dogs, don't you?" the professor said with a shrug. "Compatibility is key for stuff like this. If you're up against someone you hate, you'd be more motivated to keep going until you win. This kinda emotion is useful fuel for tappin' into new spells or magic. Newkern, if you manage to tap into earth magic with this, you'll become a dual element master of fire and earth. Sounds great, right?"

Alicia probably wouldn't want Shuya to worry about her when she held that audience with the Royal Knight. She'd most likely head off to Yoram without telling him the real reason behind the trip, and Shuya wouldn't be around to protect her regardless of what went down. That's why I decided to watch over her in Shuya's stead. I didn't think much of it, just going with the flow, but... If I told her that straight up, she'd probably throw a fit.

"All righty, Greatlorde, go give Newkern a couple slaps to the cheek. As for you, Newkern, picture using an earth spell in your mind to stop Greatlorde's hand and use your magic. You can't potentially tap into a new element without being pushed to your limit, ya know?"

The classroom buzzed with excitement.

I wrote "*I don't owe you an explanation. At all.*" down on a scrap of paper of my own and scrunched it up before lobbing it at Alicia's face. Then I turned my attention to the two students facing off against each other on the lecture podium.

"Shuya Newkern. I'm only going to say this once. I know you've made fun of me behind my back for being 'poor' before."

"Valjean Greatlorde. Your family's lands may be vast, but you have nothing to show for it except for your house standing. Do you really think *you* can manage the Greatlorde lands in the future?" Shuya huffed. "Plus, I'm right on the money when I say you have none. You'll hand over your people if you know what's good for them."

House Newkern and House Greatlorde shared neighboring territories in the southeast of Daryth. The civilians who lived on those lands weren't bound by convention and generally moved about freely between the two families' lands.

Because of that, the baron of Newkern and the earl of Greatlorde both resorted to all kinds of methods to entice citizens into staying on their respective lands. I'd heard that Newkern had pulled ahead in terms of migration and the subsequent benefits from it. Being the heirs to these rival families, it was only natural that these two butted heads like their fathers did. *I guess that's why they don't get along at all.*

"You seem pretty popular with the commoners lately," Shuya sneered. "How *befitting* of an earl house—"

"You're one to talk. You're from a baron house, how *dare* you look down on me—" Valjean hissed in reply.

Wow, these two have no shame. I sighed at their antics. They were nobles, for goodness' sake. Seeing them act like this made me fear for this country's future.

Professor Loco Moco might've been the ideal instructor for a combat-based class like Practical Magic, but he had absolutely no idea how to handle a theory-based class like Magic Studies. *Oh well. I can rely on him in an emergency if it comes down to that. I can't be too picky.*

From the corner of my eye, I saw something move, snapping me out of my thoughts. I looked over only to find Alicia had moved four seats over.

"—Huh?!" I gasped, startled. I hadn't even seen her move; she must've snuck nimbly like a cat to the seat right next to me while my focus was on Shuya and Valjean. "Since when did you get that close?"

"Everyone's watching those two dunderheads, so nobody's going to notice us talking," she said. "So, why did you accept the cardinal's request? It's not like you actually have a shot at becoming a knight even if you wanted to. In fact, you're a *pig*, so I'd say your chances are in the negatives."

"'Dunderheads' and negative chances, huh?" I quoted her. "You're just casually dropping disses left and right."

"Just tell me the reason!"

I held my silence for a moment. "I'm still a Denning, but I was a good-for-nothing for a long time," I said slowly. "That's what people think of me right now. No matter how many accomplishments I achieve that are deserving of commendation, my past won't disappear."

"That's your own fault. Even in Cirquista, you're made fun of as a clown with thick skin. However, if your father ever hears that you, a Denning, went along with his biggest rival, the cardinal and the Royal Knight Commander both... You'll never hear the end of it."

"A request from the cardinal is equal to a request from the royal family in this country," I argued. "I can't just turn that down."

"The royal family?" Alicia was taken aback. "Why would the royal family send someone like *you* a request like that?"

“Hell if I know. But, well, it couldn’t hurt to make the cardinal owe me one. You just don’t mess around with that old man’s political influence.”

Though it would have made more sense to summon me alone to discuss the request from the cardinal, the headmaster probably had summoned us both that day because he secretly wanted me to watch over Alicia. He seemed worried about her, since she had gone through a frightening experience with the mercenary and all that. It was most likely meant to be just a small favor on his end.

Did this mean that I’d earned his trust?

That wasn’t the only reason, in any case. I couldn’t just tell her that I wanted to keep an eye on her and keep her stubbornness in check. I’d sooner take *that* particular thought to my grave. Truth be told, the bit about wanting to curry the cardinal’s favor was me fumbling for any excuse, but it seemed that Alicia bought it. *Well, well... She is quite a troublesome princess.*

“I wasted my time asking you. That’s such a boring reason,” she said.

“Oh, shut up... What about *you*? Do you really think you’re going to make that bandit group pay for their actions? They murdered *royalty*! It’s a problem even the Royal Knights are trying to deal with, in case you forgot.”

“I *am* royalty,” Alicia argued. “I can’t just hole up in the school knowing that my relative’s murderer is still at large. I repeat, *I am royalty*. Cirquista is part of my name, and it holds weight. You wouldn’t know a thing about the significance of that.”

“The duty of royalty, huh?” I muttered. “If I remember right, though, you weren’t even that close to the relative who died. They were a prime target of bandits because even among the Cirquistan royal family they were treated as a lunatic and sent off to live on their own.”

“How do you know so much...?” Alicia glared at me hard. The glare of a beautiful person was hard to bear. Even though I only spoke the truth, I withered under the force of that stare.

This was bad. I needed to figure out a way to throw her suspicion off. *Urgh, I need to break the habit of talking about knowledge I gained from anime and other media without thinking.* “Well...” I hesitated. “I mean, what I want to say is... Are you able to put your life on the line for a person you’ve never met?”

“Your world revolves around yourself. You wouldn’t understand my pain at all...” Alicia trailed off. She changed the topic instead of elaborating. “Whatever. Back to my original question. Is that really the whole story?”

“I want the cardinal’s favor. That’s it. It’s like you said, I only

think for myself.” I shrugged.

Alicia paused. “I really, *really* wasted my time asking you. That’s a stupid reason for accepting his request.”

“All right, Newkern, Greatlorde. Back to your seats. Head to the infirmary later and get them to cast a healin’ spell on you. Oh, but make sure you tell no one that you got hurt during Magic Studies, you hear me? Uh... If anyone asks, tell ’em you got it in Practical Magic. Bein’ a professor makes things complicated for me and all that.”

Shuya headed up the stairs towards his seat, nursing a swollen face. Just before he could plop down, however, he let out a confused “Huh?” and stared up at us two in surprise.

“Alicia... Haven’t you realized?” I muttered.

“What?”

“You’re too close to me. Everyone’s looking at you.”

“Huh? Aaah!” Alicia yowled when she finally realized all the attention she had attracted, swiftly moving back to her original seat.

“The homework for this week...” The professor trailed off. “All right, I want y’all to think about what element you would awaken if you were to manage tappin’ into a new one. Include your reasonin’ for it and prepare to demonstrate why in the next class.”

Surprisingly, the homework he gave was quite meaningful. Few nobles would consider practicing a new element because they were used to using magic of their own element since childhood. The professor’s assignment would be good for them to start thinking outside of their comfort zone.

None of these applied to me, though, since I was a mage of all elements. As I thought that, Shuya looked over at me furtively. His raging fight against Lord Pauper had left him with red, swollen cheeks.

“Oh, that’s right. I nearly forgot. No homework for Denning and Cirquista,” the professor said, almost as an afterthought. “The old co—I mean, the headmaster has a special extracurricular assignment for the two of you.”

Everyone’s gazes focused on Alicia and me back in the top row. I could hear accusing voices echoing up from the rows of seats below. Shuya also stared at me with incredulous eyes, asking silently, “*Why you?*”

“Also, you two are exempt from the rest of your afternoon classes. And before anyone says anything, yes, this is special treatment, but there is good reason for that. If you kiddos want special treatment too, then you’ll just have to earn it. Work on gettin’ yourselves some sorta status, power, or connections. That’s all for today.” The professor’s

statement left no room for young, naive ideas about how the world operated.

And with that, he dismissed us from Magic Studies class.

The sky was clear today, as if the heavens didn't have a single care in the world.

"Time to dig in, oink!" For the midday meal, we were free to choose between eating food hot off the stove in the dining hall or takeout lunch boxes. I was in the mood for a lunch box today; sitting on a bench in front of the main campus square, I wolfed down my lunch under that cheerful blue sky.

The lawn was neatly trimmed, and birdsong echoed over the grounds. You couldn't find such a natural environment anywhere in the city. Though the incident with the mercenary was still fresh in my mind, today, Kirsch was peaceful as always.

Suddenly, a blond sat beside me on the bench. "Lord Slowe, may I ask about the statement Professor Loco Moco made earlier?"

Lord Pauper's golden locks swayed gently in the wind, and he sighed as he fiddled with his hair. Though he was a handsome man possessed of an almost otherworldly beauty, it was a little painful just looking at the cuts and bruises left on his cheek.

"What's this about an extracurricular assignment with Lady Alicia? Does this have anything to do with the Royal Knights?"

"H-Hey Lord Pauper, you can't just appear out of nowhere and start bombarding me with questions," I protested. "What do you mean by 'to do with the Royal Knights'?"

"The headmaster recommended a well-performing student to the Order in the past. You captured the mercenary during that uproar the other day, so I thought it might be..." Valjean trailed off. "What's with that face? If I didn't know any better, I'd say I was right! W-Wait, don't tell me... Did you skip the Royal Knight stage and go straight to Guardian Knight?! Oh goodness, if you become a Guardian Knight, please recommend me to the Order! Pretty please!"

"Don't be silly!" I exclaimed. "Are you still half asleep or something?!" Though I said that out loud, inwardly, my heart was racing. Valjean had hit the nail right on the head. "A Guardian Knight is an honor that only one person in this entire country can earn! You know that!"

"But you used to be the Prodigy of Wind, Lord Slowe. The royal family regarded you highly back then too, or so I'm told."

"That's all in the past! Listen up. The Order has a massive grudge against House Denning which, in case you forgot, is *my* House. Not only that, but up until only recently, I was so infamous that I wasn't even treated as human!"

“Ah, that’s true. House Denning and the Order *are* like oil and water. Now that I think about it, the odds of you becoming a Royal Knight are about as high as a dragon doing tap dance.”

“Hey, you! You praise me one moment, but then mock me the next! What the heck!” I complained. “Forget it. I wanted to ask you about Charlotte. Is she doing okay at her job as a maid?”

Charlotte worked as a waitress in the dining hall now, having been reassigned from washing dishes. Valjean worked hard part-time there too. He was Charlotte’s coworker, and he also helped her out whenever he could as they both tackled the so-called “morning battlefield.”

“Miss Charlotte? Well, she *was* pretty awful on the first day, but you don’t have to worry about her anymore. She’s getting along with the maids too. She’s a really good girl. Honestly, it’s hard to fathom that she’s *your* retainer.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, she was with you during your dark period. I was just impressed that her personality didn’t take a turn for the worse.” Valjean let out a chuckle.

“Knock it off,” I huffed. “Anyways, if you want to enter the Order, practice using light spells. Most of the Knights can use light magic.”

“That’s true. That’s a more realistic option than hoping you become the Guardian Knight and pass along a recommendation for me...”

“Buttering me up for my social connections, huh?” I muttered. “Go on, shoo. Go practice.”

Valjean nodded his head in agreement, getting up to go head to the training field or something. Professor Loco Moco had just handed out a new assignment, so other people were probably working on it there too. Nobles usually headed there to practice magic even during lunch.

The warm sun was pleasant, and I stifled a yawn. I closed my eyes and basked in the breeze. That was when a voice called out to me. “L-Lord Denning! Haaah... There you are! I finally found you!” A female student suddenly appeared like an unexpected gust of wind. The girl paused to catch her breath. “U-Um, is it true that you’re going to stay over at my family’s inn?!”

Her breasts *jiggled*. I stared at the ground in reflex as the girl huffed and puffed. I was a naive and innocent noble. This was too much for me.

“The inn! Lord Denning!”

“Inn? What inn? Please calm down, Tina. Take a deep breath. One, two, three.”

Tina breathed in and out. “Haaah... Wait, that’s not it! You’re

going to Yoram, right?!”

“You haven’t calmed down at all.”

“I am! Super! Duper! Calm!” Tina insisted. “So about that! You’re heading to Yoram soon, right?!”

“Uh... How do you know that, Tina?” Professor Loco Moco had spilled the beans and everyone knew that Alicia and I were leaving campus for an “extracurricular assignment.” However, our destination was still kept a big secret. I couldn’t imagine Alicia telling anyone where we were going either.

“My mom contacted me and asked about what food you like, so I figured that could be the only explanation! It looks like my guess was right on point!”

“Wait... Is Gordoni—”

“That’s my place! My house!”

“Shush! You’re being loud!”

After that conversation, I made Tina promise solemnly to not breathe a word of it to anyone. In exchange for looking over her mini earth golem homework sometime, I made her promise not to tell anyone where I and Alicia were headed for that “extracurricular assignment.”

I’d been lounging on the chair in my room after dinner when a single maid barged in.

“Master Slowe, I have heard it all!”

“Wh-Who are you?!” *A trespasser?! I didn’t call for any maids!*

The maid tilted her head in question. “What are you talking about? It’s me!”

“Oh, Charlotte... I didn’t recognize you in that maid uniform.” Charlotte beamed at me, as though it was totally usual for her to wear a white apron on top of a black dress. For whatever reason, she had a bulging bag strapped to her back.

“Wait, did you already hear about...” I trailed off.

“Yes! You’re heading off to Yoram with Lady Alicia at first light, right? Here, please take a look! I’m already all prepared!” Charlotte dropped the bag onto the ground with a loud thud. What in the world had she put in there?

“I asked for a break from my chores for a while, too, so I’m all set!” Saying that, she opened her bag. She’d packed all the necessities for an overnight venture tightly inside, and then some.

Words of praise for Charlotte hung at the tip of my tongue, along the lines of, “I should expect nothing less from you, Charlotte. You’re so efficient.” But I swallowed my words when I spotted her staring dreamily past me.

“I didn’t think you would become a Guardian Knight... Master

Slowe, the protector of royalty...”

“I haven’t gotten the job yet. Plus, I did accept the request, but I don’t plan on seriously aiming for that title.”

“Huuuh?! Don’t be ridiculous!!!”

Charlotte was over the moon, whispering under her breath about me being a Royal Knight with a brilliant smile. She was happier than me for my not-yet-achievement, and it put a bounce in her step as she made the preparations for my journey.

“Rooyoal Kniight, Guaardian Kniight,” she sang. “The princess is theere. You’ll be summoned for a dinner party in the royal couurt. I’ll be summoned toooo. And there will be lots of fooood. But I’ll watch over you so that you don’t eat too muuuch. But in the end, you won’t be able to help yourself...and you’ll eat and eaaat...and you’ll grow fat...again...”

Charlotte took out the clothes for me from the closet and started stuffing them into her bag as she sang strange lyrics to an even stranger tune. However, her smile wilted more and more as she sang. “And Master Slowe became a piglet with a white cape...”

Even Charlotte of all people had a hard time shaking off my negative image. Guess it really stuck with her after all these years of dealing with me.

My first goal was, and still is, to lose the most weight in the shortest amount of time possible. *I’m not trying to bite off more than I can chew and hope to become a lean, muscular guy, but I’d kill to be a normal weight at least!*

However, I’d only recently escaped the range of extreme obesity. If I had the real weight loss potion from the speed-eating contest, everything might be a lot easier, but Charlotte had smashed that into smithereens. I couldn’t possibly fork up the money for the weight loss potion sold at the market right now, ridiculously pricey as it was. For the time being, I continued drinking Charlotte’s original weight loss potion, but it didn’t seem to have much effect. There I was thinking that maybe I should stop drinking it soon, when—

“Oh yeah, there are a few things I have to give to you.” Charlotte looked proud of herself as she handed over a bottle to me, filled with a thick, cloudy liquid.

What in the world was it? There was something long and thin floating in the murky liquid. “Uh, there’s something in here.”

“It’s a cute little Greasy Earthworm!”

“That’s... Whoever named that thing has a horrific sense for giving names...”

“Master Slowe, have you never heard of the cute Greasy Earthworm?”

“Of course I’ve never heard of it. Oh my... This thing’s eye is huge...”

Charlotte giggled. “Please don’t be surprised when you hear this! This cute Greasy Earthworm is actually...” Charlotte paused for effect. “Who would have guessed? It’s a monster used in weight loss potions made specifically for mages, so it’s perfect for you, since you’re on a diet! Master Slowe, please shake the bottle!”

I shook the bottle as told, and the Greasy Earthworm inside snapped its one eye wide open. *Th-The hell?! This thing is scary as heck! It’s still alive and kicking in there! I nearly dropped this dang bottle!*

“Please shake it carefully. This bottle cost an entire month’s salary!”

I was silent for a moment. “Charlotte. You didn’t have to spend money on something so...trendy...like this.”

“If you lose weight, then my value as your personal retainer will shoot right up, so I think of it as an investment. But I don’t have any money left, so I think this will be the last weight loss potion I can make for you... So please, cherish it.”

Charlotte then started regaling me with the effectiveness of the Greasy Earthworm and how much trouble she had gone through to get it, but...how was I supposed to tell her that she’d probably been scammed? *Sorry, Charlotte. It will react to my mana and I’ll lose weight, you say? And burn my fat? I’ve never heard of something like that.*

It was the oldest trick in the book. An adventurer with money troubles would catch a new monster never seen before and sell it to a normal civilian, faking its effects to make a quick buck. But since this was the last weight loss potion Charlotte had made for me, I decided to not prod too much and to drink it with appreciation.

Charlotte hummed happily to herself, turning back to my closet. “Ah, that’s my handkerchief. I thought I’d lost it, but it was in Master Slowe’s room, huh. Hee hee hee...” She giggled.

Charlotte continued cleaning my room and packing necessities. According to her, we didn’t know how long we would be away for, so she intended on cleaning my room fully before our departure. Honestly, Charlotte might not like to hear this, but she looked exactly like a maid when she was wearing that maid’s uniform. Nothing more, nothing less.

“Charlotte, you look pretty happy today.”

“Up until now, I had pretty much acted as your personal maid. But now... I can finally do work fit for a retainer for once! Okay then, I’m nearly done with the cleaning. Are you ready, Master Slowe?”

“Ready...? Wait, are you—”

The Greasy Earthworm still stared at me from inside the bottle. Its one eye seemed to demand, *“Let me out of here at once!”* Was Charlotte

trying to tell me to drink *this* right here, right now? *I-I'm not ready yet!* I gulped. To my delight and surprise, Charlotte took something out of her breast pocket instead.

"Ta-da! I've actually got a letter for you."

The handwriting on the front of the envelope was neat and tidy, and I recognized it as my mother's. How long had it been since I'd last gotten a letter from her? In her long and tedious letter, she demanded answers about what happened at the school, what I did, and what kind of spells I used to capture the mercenary.

Like the headmaster said, House Denning still seemed to be in the dark about the invitation from the cardinal addressed to me. *Still, this is such skilled penmanship... But it's so cursive-y that it's hard to actually read!*

"Um, Master Slowe, look at this part..." Charlotte's delicate finger pointed at a certain section of the letter.

"You already read that far?" I looked over and I was shocked silent for a moment. "Huh? You've got to be kidding me."

To sum it up, my father had returned from the front lines and would be coming to Kirsch in person to ask about what had happened with the mercenary.

"He's just going to drop all of his responsibilities and come here?" I said at length.

"The duke cherished you a lot before, so..." Charlotte trailed off.

"Still, it's too sudden."

Charlotte hesitated. "Yeah."

A heavy silence hung between the two of us. Like Charlotte said, my father had doted on me in the past. Back in the day, it was by my father's insistence that I was chosen as the heir to House Denning despite being the youngest child.

"What will happen to us? Would they make us go back? I mean, no other duke houses have sent their children to this school, so..." Charlotte let out a whisper. Her earlier cheerfulness had vanished, and she teared up.

Yeah... I get where she's coming from. My father is an extremely strict military leader. I don't know how many times he's brought his iron fist down on me after I became the blackhearted Piggy Duke. He doesn't cut Charlotte any slack either. In fact, he's the one who took away Charlotte's wand and her right to wield it.

"Let's just focus on preparing for our trip for now. We'll worry about that later."

"Y-Yeah... We're not going to be able to talk them out of it either..."

A short while later...

“I’ll hold it!” Charlotte argued.

“No, I will!” I rebutted.

“I’m your retainer, so I will!”

We bickered animatedly with each other, arguing about who should be the one to carry our luggage to the horse carriage waiting by the school gates. Anything to distract us from the reality that letter had dropped upon us.

Chapter 2: The Insurmountable Wall Between the Formerly Betrothed

The town of Yoram was several hours away from the main gates of Kirsch by carriage. With Daryth situated in the central-western part of the continent, it was home to several well-traveled towns, and Yoram was among the liveliest of them all. The town had the establishment of Kirsch Mage Institute to thank for its prosperity, beginning to flourish around the time the school was built.

The residential district for the landowners of Yoram lay at the center of town, punctuated by the signature clock tower that people could see from miles and miles around.

“Cutting Swordfish! Get your pickled Cutting Swordfish here! It’s a high-class delicacy that we’ll be selling wholesale to *the* mage school, so get it before it’s gone!” a merchant shouted.

“If you don’t want to get hurt, get out of my way! I’m in a hurry!” another hissed.

The voices of traveling merchants and porters echoed down the road as they came and went. Dotting the crowd were people wearing top-quality capes—probably nobles, if I had to guess. People pushed and shoved their way through the cobblestone streets.

“Master Slowe, I’ll help you carry some of this! You take half, and I’ll take half!”

“Really? But half is too much... Okay, why don’t you carry these two things for me?” I replied.

“Yes! Please leave it to m—”

“Miss Charlotte! Please don’t waste your time!” Alicia cut her off.

“This the latest single-edge, two-handed sword brought straight from the finest smiths in the capital. Just look at its golden hilt!”

“Quick! You can buy this sage mountain water for only a few kumul silvers! Hurry and get some while you can!”

Soldiers patrolled the area frequently, so Yoram was a safe town. The lord who owned the land the town itself sat on was also a good person, from what I heard. It was just the right size for Kirsch students to come and have fun on the weekends. Even us nobles, who were picky about entertainment, could have fun here without much worry or fear for our safety.

A band must’ve been performing somewhere, as music echoed

throughout the streets, adding to the town's lively atmosphere.

"Miss Charlotte, if you have the time to speak to *that guy*, you have the time to go buy that ring. Be a dear and do that for me, would you? That one the gentleman with the feathered hat over there is bidding for. I'm busy looking at the other things for sale over here." Alicia paused. "Hm, as long as it's less than double the price he's offering, I want you to buy it."

"U-Understood, Lady Alicia, but... Is it really okay for you to spend this much money?"

"I sold a lot of gems I didn't need at the pawn shop back there, so I'm fine."

The late afternoon sun bathed the entertainment district near the center of the city with a swath of light in orange and red.

Alicia led our little group, disguised in civilian's clothing. Her outfit made for a poor attempt to blend in with the crowd, though, the red skirt too flashy and glamorous for keeping a low profile. Charlotte followed behind her, wearing a casual dress instead of her usual retainer uniform. I brought up the rear with all our baggage, bumping into people as I tailed behind.

"U-Um, Lady Alicia, shouldn't we head to the inn soon?" Charlotte asked.

"I have a porter for once. There's no way I'm letting this opportunity pass me by."

Of the three of us, "Her Highness" held the reins. Though we could have headed straight to the inn, this spoiled princess strutted around town without a care in the world, wearing the light-pink earring she had just bought. Vendors' stalls lined the pavement all over town, the merchants manning them all beckoning to Alicia as she passed by, trying to fetch the highest price they could for their trinkets. She was every merchant's dream customer.

I had a ton of shopping bags hanging from both arms and even a strange package hanging from my neck; heavens only knew what *that* bag contained. I kept bumping into people. I was sure my head would fall off my shoulders for how many times I had to nod apologetically as I stumbled my way through.



Charlotte hesitated, looking back at me. “Master Slowe, I can help. Please let me take that.”

“Jeez, how many times do I have to repeat myself?!” Alicia exclaimed. “It’s Piggy Slowe’s job to be our errand boy, so stop wasting time with unnecessary tasks!”

The horse carriage had gone on and delivered our luggage directly to the inn. If everything had gone according to plan, we should’ve had nothing on us, but of course Alicia had other plans. I’d been looking forward to just having a nice chat with Charlotte on the way to the inn, but Alicia kept butting in and cutting us off every time we tried to talk.

“B-But...”

“Maids aren’t allowed to talk back!” Alicia snapped. “Come on, hurry up!”

Charlotte groaned. “B-But I’m not a maid...”

Alicia had no qualms about showing her arrogance. Judging by her looks now, the main heroine of *Shuya Marionette* would definitely grow into an absolutely drop-dead gorgeous woman. People on the street watched me with envy as she ordered me around as if they thought I’d be there to see that glamorous future. *Following her orders is actually quite stressful, you know...*

“Excuse me, miss, you’re in the way!” A child forced their way across the street, barreling into Alicia and knocking her off her feet.

“Ah!” Alicia exclaimed.

On reflex, I reached out to catch her—still weighed down by baggage—and kept her from hitting the ground. Her body was delicate, and I felt her warmth seep through her clothing.

“Alicia,” I sighed. “Have you forgotten why we’re even here?”

The spoiled little princess flushed a light shade of pink in embarrassment. “H-Hmph! Fine, no more shopping then. A-Anyways, can you let me go...? Let go of me already! Come on! Shoo!”

If this was any indication of how the next few days with her were going to go, I thought I could already feel my stomach churning in dread from stress.

The two girls weaved their way across the crowd towards the clock tower in the center of town, and I hurried along behind them. As we walked, I thought back to the words Tina had given me before I left school.

“Lord Denning! Keep your eye out for two brawny guards! That’s how you’ll know you’ve found my family’s place!”

Before I realized it, we had wandered off the wide main avenue and into a more narrow backstreet. I struggled with the shopping bags

in the alleyway until I came upon a grand gate at the end of it. Two muscular men stood before the gate, unmoving and menacing.

“You’re so slow!” Alicia hissed. She and Charlotte had drawn up short of actually approaching the gate.

“It’s because I’m trying not to drop your stuff,” I said with a shrug. “Still, what’s going on? Why’d you stop in the middle of the...”

Then I caught sight of the weapons on these guys and stopped dead in my tracks myself.

They were armed to the teeth, one with a huge claymore and the other with a deadly-looking spear. Those weapons were way too much for simple guard duty—if I had to guess, I’d say they were meant more for monsters than for men. Between that and their intimidating aura, they had to be veteran adventurers. My eyes drifted up to the name etched into the gate in large embossed letters:

Gordoni.

Underneath that was a gold plate, even proudly stating that this inn had served as hosts to the royal family themselves.

I didn’t dare approach the guards yet, but I mustered up the courage to peer past them at what lay beyond the gate. A path cut through the property and led to a well-trimmed garden with a fountain set off from the walking path; beyond that stood two buildings. One was a gigantic brick manor I could only guess was the inn, and beside it, a smaller manor detached from the main building. Though those were the only two buildings, the land was large enough to easily fit ten more shops.

I sucked in a breath and whispered, “You’ve got to be kidding me...”

Tina... All this time I thought you were just a regular commoner, and yet you come from a rich family...

“Yes, yes! My girl has told me all about you, young Master Denning!” a woman said, her voice soft and polite. “I honestly never expected that we would receive your reservations directly from the cardinal himself. This is truly an honor. We prepared two rooms for you on the top floor, so please follow me.”

Our hostess was none other than the inn’s proprietor, Tina’s mother.

People say that one can tell the quality of an inn by its patrons, and by that measure, it didn’t get more high-class than the Gordoni Inn. The reception hall was polished to a shine so bright I could nearly see my own reflection in it. Tasteful, classy furniture lined the halls, fit for the wealthy merchants and greater nobles who likely frequented the place. It wasn’t beyond the realm of possibility that the royal family had actually stayed here in the past.

“I heard that you’ve been a big help to my daughter, milord. I cannot thank you enough. Is she doing well there?”

“I think she’s doing just fine. She has a lot of friends, and from what I hear, she has excellent grades in class. She even managed to tap into some earth magic.”

“I never imagined that she’d awaken any magical talent. It does worry me a little, truth be told,” Tina’s mother said, her head bobbing as she nodded repeatedly.

As we walked up the stairs, I observed Tina’s mother. Her daughter clearly inherited her big eyes and good proportions. Of course, one of the most striking things about her was her well-endowed bosom, only further highlighted by the way her clothes hugged her curves. *Will Tina look like that when she grows up?* I wondered. *Wait. Honestly, she’s already big enough as it is.*

“Firstly, here is your room, young master.” We stopped at the second to last door on the uppermost floor. She bowed deeply to me as she opened the door to allow me into the room.

“Now then, young master Denning, I hope that you and your retainer enjoy your stay... Speaking of which, are you the young master’s maid?” the woman said, turning to Charlotte.

“Huh...? I’m not a maid. I’m Master Slowe’s retainer!”

Tina’s mother was taken aback, the color slowly draining from her face. “Y-Your retainer is...a girl? Wait, but aren’t all Denning retainers male?!”

Vaulted ceilings stretched high, and the carpet was so deep I nearly sunk down to my ankle. A cushy chair sat next to the fireplace that would have been stoked to a full roar if it were winter. Everything about this room just oozed class and luxury.

“People really seem to misunderstand House Denning in so many ways,” Charlotte said.

“Yeah...” I sighed.

Tina’s mother took the rumors that Denning retainers remained by their master’s side and never even slept on beds at face value. I assured her that they were nothing more than rumors, but when I thought back on my life back home... It wasn’t that far off from the truth. Such retainers actually *did* exist in House Denning. And many retainers were, in fact, men—just not all of them, like she’d assumed.

Charlotte wasted little time unpacking, checking to make sure that all of our luggage had arrived. We didn’t know how long we’d stay in Yoram, but Charlotte said that she had packed enough for two weeks.

The inn had offered to put us in a room with two beds, but Charlotte had shrunk into herself, worried about troubling the innkeepers. I declined the offer, assuring that there wasn’t an issue.

The bed was so big that there wasn't any problem with both of us sleeping on it. Plus, I could just sleep on the sofa.

"So, why are *you* here, Alicia?"

"You got a problem with that?" Alicia declared. She'd barged into the bedroom and plopped down onto the edge of the bed, arms crossed.

"It's not that I have a problem, but your suite is next door," I said, pointing a thumb over my shoulder at the door to the living room—and the exit it led to.

Alicia stared me down. "Do you *really* think you can share a room with Charlotte? That's preposterous!"

"Charlotte's my retainer. True, sharing the bed might be an issue, but there's nothing wrong with sharing the same room."

"Oh, really? 'Sharing the same room,' huh? Bold words for someone with *that* kind of body. You have no shame."

"Jeez, what's wrong with you? Are you still bad-mouthing me, calling me a pig? I'll put this out there, but since you call me a pig nearly every time you open your mouth, I've gotten used to it. It doesn't bother me anymore."

"It'd be faster to show you than try to get it through your thick skull," Alicia said at length. She stood up. "All right, stand over there."

She pushed me, steering me away from where I stood. *What does she want with me?* I was puzzled. "H-Hey, what are you doing?"

"Just do as I say," she insisted.

I went along with it and ended up standing in front of a mirror.

"What can you see in the mirror?" Alicia asked.

I squinted. *A piglet, I guess?* But this was nothing compared to when I was the blackhearted Piggy Duke. Well, I mean, if you split hairs, I was probably still considered obese. But I had lost so much weight in such little time, all things considered. You could even say that I was on the fast path towards becoming a lean muscular guy.

"Now, Miss Charlotte, can you stand next to Piggy Slowe?" Alicia dragged Charlotte, who was still in the middle of checking our belongings, by the hand into the bedroom. The moment Charlotte stood next to me, the scene in the mirror had a lot more flair to it.

"With this, even an idiot like you could understand what the issue is," Alicia huffed. "*That's* what I mean."

"I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about! What are you getting at?!"

"Um, Lady Alicia, I don't mind at all... I'm Master Slowe's retainer, after all, and the bed is plenty big enough for the both of us..."

Alicia's outrage drowned out Charlotte's placating. "I don't mind

at all?! Are you half asleep?! Urgh, that's right, you've been like that since we were kids!"

Charlotte squeaked. "S-Sorry!"

"I mean, I guess to be fair to the pig, he *is* a lot better than he used to be. I heard you can fit into ready-made sized school uniforms now and that you haven't given up on losing weight... But still! Sharing a room is a big red flag! Look at the two of you in the mirror! No matter how I look at it, you two look like a shameless idiot and an idiot maid you've captured!"

"Who are you calling a shameless idiot?!"

"I'm *not* a maid... And I'm not an idiot..." Charlotte mumbled.

"You're not allowed to share a bed in the suite next to mine! A no is a no and that's a big no-no!"

"You're such a pain." I sighed. "It's not a big deal. You've slept in the same room as Shuya, so—"

"Huh... HUUUH?! When did I share a bed with Shuya?! That guy is nothing but a servant to me! There's absolutely no way I'd sleep in the same room as him, let alone share a bed!"

Oops. Alicia and Shuya getting closer didn't happen until later in the anime. Saying this to her didn't mean anything. Still, Shuya was 'nothing but a servant' to her, huh? The poor guy.

"I'm just joking about Shuya. Don't get your skirts in a twist."

"Even if it was a joke, that's crossing the line!" Alicia snapped.

"My bad... But still, if you're so against me even sharing a room with Charlotte, where should I sleep, then?"

"Oh," Alicia muttered in realization. Clearly she hadn't thought this through. "Oh yeah, you can take my room, Piggy Slowe."

I frowned. "Your room? Not a chance. It looks like a little girl's room with all those plushies. Plus, the bed has a canopy. It's not to my taste at all."

From the glimpse I'd gotten of her room earlier, it was way better suited for a small girl like Alicia than for someone like me. An orc sleeping in a pink room in a canopy bed... I shivered at the image. What a nightmare that'd be.

Well, my room was pretty big, so there wouldn't be any issue living with one more occupant. On top of that, Alicia hated my guts, so it wouldn't be long before she got sick of me and returned to her own room.

"Hey," Alicia began, "I just realized this, but what's that cute little kitty on the bed doing here?"

Charlotte had been sneaking back into the living room from the bedroom before she froze at Alicia's words and followed the line of sight where Alicia pointed.

“Wha—! Why is Al here?! I left him back at school!”

The black cat meowed in response to Charlotte’s voice, whipping its tail back and forth.

But that wasn’t a cat, it was the Great Spirit of Wind. They were Charlotte’s guardian, though the poor beast had long since lost all their ferocity. I was the only one in this country who knew the cat’s true identity.

Wait a minute. Did Alicia really just call that cat ‘cute’? That cat with such a sour-looking face? *Wow, she has terrible taste. I guess I forgot to tell the Great Spirit that we were going to Yoram. I see... Maybe that’s why they’re glaring at me. They sure do know how to hold a grudge.*

“Miss Charlotte, you know this cat?”

Charlotte giggled. “Yep, this cat is actually mine.”

“I-I see... So he’s your pet?” Alicia paused. “H-Hmm... He’s quite c-cute, I suppose... M-Miss Charlotte, may I pet him?”

While the two played with the cat, I took all of Alicia’s spoils from her shopping spree today and headed off to put them all in her room.

Since her suite was the one next to mine, it was only a short walk down the corridor; it didn’t take long before I was nudging the door open with a click. I left the baggage in the corner of the spacious living room before straightening, pausing to take in the room at large. The room itself wasn’t too different from mine in terms of layout, but the bedroom was a little too cutesy for me... The workers at Gordoni had probably researched the Cirquistan princess’s tastes and tried to make it as accommodating for her as possible. I could clearly see the trouble they’d gone to.

“But I haven’t finished unpacking our luggage! Please head to the baths on your own, Lady Alicia!” Charlotte exclaimed.

“No, you’re coming with me, Miss Charlotte! I have a bone to pick with you about the proper decency of a lady!”

“I’m fine! I know all about the proper decency of a lady!” Charlotte protested. “P-Please let go of me!”

When I returned to my room, I spotted Alicia trying to drag a struggling Charlotte from my room. Best to let sleeping dogs lie, as they say, and so I held my tongue and watched my retainer get dragged away and disappear down the stairs.

I stared for a moment. “I guess I’ll go wash up before dinner too.”

“Oiiink!!!” I groaned in satisfaction.

The bath was so relaxing that I couldn’t help the snort that escaped me. Though the bathing room was a tad smaller than the ones at school, the inn’s bath was way more comfortable and relaxing. At school, the baths were always noisy, and you could forget about

having any privacy. I always had someone's eyes on me, even there. Above all, I hated letting others see this chubby body of mine.

I slowly sank into the bath until I was fully submerged below the steaming water, letting my thoughts flow to the front of my mind. Tomorrow morning, the Royal Knights would come to this inn for the audience. *Which ones will be coming?* I wondered. I was curious, I had to admit. I decided I'd have to peek in on their conversation with Alicia.

Other than that...I was a little worried about the relationship between Alicia and Charlotte. Earlier, Charlotte seemed to be walking on eggshells around Alicia and trying to be considerate of her, but Alicia didn't seem to care. It reminded me of the dream I had, and *that* reminded me that she was no different now from how she was back then... Even when we were kids, she'd never approved of Charlotte. *But I think it'll work out somehow. Those two are good at communicating with others, unlike me...*

I heard a muffled voice from above the water call out to me. "Oi, milord, you all right? You're turning bright red!"

Oops, I nearly drowned myself in the bathtub. I sat up quickly, nodding over at the man in acknowledgment. *Guess I better get going before I start getting dizzy. Besides, Charlotte and Alicia are probably getting out right about now too.* I sighed inwardly. *Ugh, Alicia made me follow her around during her shopping today, so I'm exhausted in a different way than usual...*

"What a gross sound... The young lord sounded like an orc in heat..." the man who'd called out muttered.

"Yeah, you'd think we were in a dungeon or something, hearing that kind of noise," another replied.

Wait a minute. Will I really be able to get any sleep tonight...? There was only one bed in our room. I'd have to share a bed with Charlotte.

I mean, it's only the first day since we came to town. I-Isn't it way too early for something like this to happen? But Charlotte didn't seem to mind me there at all. She said that she didn't have any issue with sharing a bed with me, even though Alicia got mad at her for saying so. That's how little Charlotte minded. Me, on the other hand? My heart is racing, oink...

It turned out I'd worried for nothing. A thick-skinned intruder ruined the moment my naive little heart had anticipated, her snores loud in the otherwise quiet room. *Damn, she's so loud!*

Alicia's sleeping face was deceptively innocent and a stark contrast to her usual haughty scowl. Especially considering she'd wedged herself between me and Charlotte, claiming the middle of the giant bed as if she owned the place. I'd thought, maybe somewhat stupidly, that if I waited long enough she'd give up and head back to

her room. I never expected her to *actually* sleep in here.

On Alicia's other side, my angel lay facing my way, making it easy for me to see her looking innocent and adorable in deep sleep. Her snow-white skin, her soft cheeks, her pajamas ruffled in a state which I couldn't bear to look at directly—

“Oink... Oiiink...” To translate that from orc-speak to human-speak, my snorts basically said, “I can't sleep.”

Thanks to Alicia, I'd calmed down some, but now my head swam with the realization that I was sharing a bed with not one but *two* girls. My nickname was the “human orc,” remember? Could an orc like me actually sleep in the same room as two human maidens?

Oink! Oiiink!

I screamed internally, trying to both contain and release my pent-up nerves. Phew, that calmed me down a bit. My thoughts were still in shambles, but I pretended hard that I was calm and closed my eyes. For some reason, my eyes had been glued to the snow-white nape of Alicia's neck, and I couldn't tear my gaze away even if I tried. The fragrance of milk and perfume blending together wafted my way.

No, stop! I won't give in to such worldly desires. I rolled over to put my back to the other two.

“O-Oink!”

...Annnd promptly fell onto the floor with a loud thud. Nobody woke up; I felt a jab of sadness. At least on the bright side, the cool floor felt nice against my way-too-warm body. *At this rate, it's probably easier for me to sleep on the floor than on the bed. For the sake of my sanity.* With that particular worry behind me, my eyelids grew heavy.

I'll just have to tell Tina the floors were just as comfortable to sleep on as the beds.



A girl with outstanding grace—but slightly less outstanding proportions underneath her nightgown—moved forward to stare at the boy who had fallen onto the ground.

The boy had groaned earlier before suddenly falling off the bed and passing out there. He mumbled in his sleep, snorting like an orc.

“Oink...Charlotte...I can't eat that...”

Even if he had lost a bit of weight, nobody in their right mind would've ever guessed that he belonged to one of the most prestigious noble houses in the country, what with how pathetic he looked.

Exasperated, Alicia sighed for the umpteenth time. At this point, she'd lost count of how many times she'd caught herself sighing at him. He'd catch a cold at this rate, which wasn't ideal, so she took pity on him and dropped a bedsheet over him. It fluttered in the air as it fell, and Slowe snorted in his sleep. *Is he trying to thank me or*

something with that snort? Alicia wondered. At any rate, it wasn't like she could make heads or tails of the sounds he made.

Alicia closed her eyes, overcome with memories from ages ago.

Her country, Cirquista, sometimes called the Country of the Water Dragon, was a major nation in the southern half of the continent. As a princess of such a major power, she had, once upon a time, been betrothed to Slowe, third son of one of the most powerful noble families in the Country of Knights.

Alicia had heard that House Denning's Prodigy of Wind had many potential suitresses. An honorable princess from a small country; the daughter of a hero; a talented mage from Minerva, the Country of Sorcery; and even offers for a hand in marriage from non-human creatures. Or so she'd heard, anyway, and the list went on and on.

Though she didn't know how or why, out of all those offers, Alicia was chosen to be his fiancée.

"Oink...Oink...Charlotte... Bugs...are definitely no good..."

She had been proud of the arrangement, thinking that it had been fitting for her. The prodigy of House Denning was so famous that his name was known far and wide throughout the entire continent, and on some days, Alicia fantasized. In those fantasies, he was her Prince Charming who came to free her from her suffocating life, tied down by things like duty and lineage in her home country. *Well...it wasn't just some days. More like every single day.*

But those halcyon days ended all too soon. People said that the Prodigy of Wind cracked and that his personality twisted and warped into something hideous. After that, Alicia's visits to the Denning lands came further and further apart until they stopped entirely. In the end, this engagement, which began without her knowledge or consent, also ended without her knowledge or consent.

Isn't that way too unfair? she'd thought at the time. *How come I never got any say in the matter?*

Determined to discover the truth with her own eyes, even though she was very late to the party, Alicia traveled all this way to enroll in Kirsch and find out what became of her former fiancé. She was crushed to find the person she knew was no more, replaced instead by a new species of orc that left only problems in his wake.

...Or at least, that's what he was for a long time.

"Oink...Charlotte... Don't...point your wand...at me..."

Lately, he was *different*. He'd *changed*. The moment he'd saved her from the mercenary when he'd picked up on the wordless message she'd tried so hard to convey... She felt as if the boy she'd once known came back, and that made her happy.

"Charlotte...I don't need...potion..."

She retraced the tangled threads of her memories, one by one.

Nobody could see inside her heart, and that was all the more reason why she couldn't help but continue to journey down memory lane.

Alicia finally drifted off to sleep, the last of the three of them. And if she slept more soundly than usual because the presence of the boy who smiled at her in those long-gone memories was so close by...well, that was her secret, and she wouldn't tell.



"Master Slowe. Master Slowe." Someone was shaking me.

Ugh, who is it? It's still early in the morning. I planned on sleeping in as much as I could today, you know. "Mmm?" I let out a muffled groan.

"Please wake up, it's already afternoon! And why are you on the floor?!"

"Huh? Charlotte..." I mumbled. Peering past Charlotte, I found I didn't recognize the ceiling above us.

Where am I? I'm not in my room, and this doesn't look like the campus. Huh? What? Why don't I know where I am, oink? Also, why am I sleeping on the ground? I looked around. There was a bedsheet on top of me. "Oh... That's right, we're in Yoram."

"Yes. Here you go." Charlotte handed over a damp cloth to me, and I scrubbed my face hard with it. Though I was still half asleep, it helped clear my mind a little. "Master Slowe, would you like some herbal tea? It's very nice."

"Yes, please, oink." On reflex, I accepted the cup she held out to me. I took a sip and a pleasant warmth spread through me from head to toe. The tea was refreshing, a mild and delicate flavor I wasn't expecting. *This is probably from the first pick of the season, huh?* I heaved a contented sigh.

Spotting the disheveled sheets on the bed, my memories of last night resurfaced. "Wait, where's Alicia?" I only just realized that the noisy girl from yesterday was missing.

"She returned to her room just now. I think we overslept. It's probably because this bed is so soft," Charlotte said.

"True, it is very soft." I nodded.

"How would you know? You slept on the floor, remember?"

"Oh, yeah... Anyway, Charlotte, when were the Royal Knights coming to greet Alicia again?"

"Um... I heard footsteps in the corridor just now, so I think they just arrived. That's why I woke you up in a rush."

"Wait, they're already here?!" I hurriedly did my morning rituals and got dressed. I was curious, wondering if I'd see the Royal Knights from the anime with my own two eyes as I walked out into the corridor.

The door to the suite next to mine stood slightly ajar.

I crept up to the door and peered into the room. There, in front of Alicia, two men in plain clothing knelt on the carpet with their heads bowed. I could hear them talking.

You wouldn't have been able to tell from their clothing that they were Royal Knights, but their aura gave them away as being more than mere commoners. If I had to put it into words, they exuded the charisma of people who held power. They probably chose to forego their signature white capes so as to keep a low profile, but it was obvious to anyone with an eye for combat that these were extraordinary people.

"It is nice to meet you, Your Highness. I hail from an earl house, and—" The Royal Knight's speech drifted through the cracked door.

So that's one of the knights participating in the Guardian trial in this town, huh? They must stand out even amongst other knights in the Order. I leaned in just a bit more to listen closer, but behind me, Charlotte was frozen stiff for some reason. *Why is she so tense and nervous?* I wondered. *Still, I expected more people.*

There were two Royal Knights there, kneeling before Alicia. I recognized Oliver, since I'd already met him once before, during the incident with No Face. He was the one who had led the group of Royal Knights in answering Headmaster Morozov's request for aid.

"I know of you, Sir Oliver, the famed Flower Knight. You were the charming knight who accompanied Her Majesty the Queen when she journeyed abroad. A member of the royal family of the country you visited offered you their hand in marriage, did they not? You stand out even among your peers in the Order," Alicia said.

"That's all in the past... I am ashamed of myself that you've heard such an embarrassing story," Oliver replied, a small bashful smile upon his lips.

"But you turned that proposal down, didn't you? It's a shame. You could have become royalty," Alicia commented.

"I have sworn my eternal loyalty to the royal family. That is all the reason I need to live. I need no other."

"...You chose loyalty over love, I see. I should have expected nothing less from a knight in the Country of Knights, unlike a certain *someone*."

"Master Slowe, Master Slowe," Charlotte whispered to me at length. "Those are the great White Capes, huh?"

Charlotte seemed to be worked up at seeing the Royal Knights in person, but my eyes were fixed on one man—the man kneeling next to Oliver. I squinted.

"O lovely princess from the Country of the Water Dragon, my name is Sepith Pendragon." My, my, what a silky voice he had, and a handsome face to match. His light ashen blue hair was slicked back in

a neat style.

Something had been bugging me about him for a while. I felt like I recognized him from somewhere, but for the life of me, I couldn't remember where. His good looks were memorable enough that I definitely wouldn't have forgotten about him if I saw him somewhere, but...

"To think that a beautiful princess like you would choose to study at our prestigious Kirsch Mage Institute... I am envious of your fellow students." The Royal Knight made theatrical gestures as he spoke, his gaze never once straying from Alicia.

Oh... It was *him*. Though his name and face didn't ring any bells right off the bat, hearing his suave and honeyed words made me realize who he was. I didn't just recognize the sight of that Royal Knight. I *knew* of him. Not just knew of him in passing either. This was the Traitor Knight, Sepith.

In *Shuya Marionette*, he had abused his position as Guardian Knight and kidnapped the crown princess, Her Highness Carina. He was the terrible prick who tried to hand Princess Carina over to the Empire! He was one of the most memorable antagonists of the anime. What in the world was he doing *here*?!

"Master Slowe, that Royal Knight over there is very dashing," Charlotte whispered feverishly.

Sepith was the epitome of tall, lean, and handsome; he had a distinctly high nose bridge, and his lips were at just the right spot on his face. He had eyes like a hawk, and one look was enough to leave a fully grown man quaking in his boots.

It was clear that if he walked the streets in town, many women would exclaim in delight and do what they could for a second glimpse of him. Even Charlotte was captivated just by the sight of him, but... I couldn't help but grit my teeth, immediately set on edge by this guy.

This man was a traitor, fated to betray Daryth and side with the Dustour Empire.

"Your Highness, it was I who humbly requested this audience with you today," Sepith said.

"You did? Um..." Alicia fumbled for words.

"Please call me Sepith, Your Highness. I am still but an inexperienced novice among the Royal Knights. I have few opportunities to meet the royalty of other countries like this, but I am confident that I will be the one who becomes the Guardian Knight." Sepith lifted his head from where he knelt to take Alicia's hand in his and pressed a kiss to it. His movements were so smooth that Alicia didn't even have the time to decline. "Even in my dreams, I could not have imagined that I would ever lay eyes on such a beautiful flower as

you.”

Oh dear, Alicia's gone all red.

“Woow, I’ve never seen Alicia lose her cool like that before,” Charlotte whispered behind me. “He’s so different from the noble students at school!”

“Royal Knights are the face of this country, and they often meet important people from other countries. They are way more refined in their conduct compared to the common noble.”

“That just makes him seem even more dashing.”

“Hmm... I don’t know about that.”

Charlotte was over the moon getting to see the Royal Knights up close, and she started shaking my shoulder hard as she gushed about it. I continued glaring at Sepith even as she rocked me back and forth with the force of her excitement.

Sepith was currently a Royal Knight, and not yet Princess Carina’s personal Guardian Knight. Was he a friend or a foe? Was he already planning on siding with the empire? I didn’t have enough information to tell whether he’d already planned on betraying Daryth.

“So, have you found the people responsible?” Alicia said, composing herself and falling back into her haughty attitude. Even in front of the Royal Knights, she was her usual proud self. The two Royal Knights tensed slightly in response to her question. Charlotte started shaking my shoulders harder at that, proving that I wasn’t just hearing things.

“Sepith, I shall take it from here.” Oliver was the first one to speak up between the two of them. My impression of Oliver was that he was a very serious and uptight man, and I could understand why Professor Loco Moco found him hard to deal with.

“Your Highness, the bandit group in this town seems to have decided to play it safe, and they have concealed themselves in the shadows. Doubtless being pursued in Cirquista was strenuous for them.”

“Well, of course it was. Our military is as powerful as it is relentless. I almost want to compliment them for escaping our clutches. Their luck is about to run out, though, what with two Royal Knights in town to sniff them out.” Alicia looked pleased and prideful.

“A single Royal Knight fights with the force of an entire army. A mere group of bandits cannot even hope to put up a fight against us. As a fellow ally in the Great Southern Alliance, and as Cirquista’s friend, we *will* destroy your enemy, Your Highness,” Sepith declared. “We shall not fail you.”

The two knights certainly carried themselves with confidence, and I could see that they had no doubt they would find the bandits with no trouble. I, on the other hand, very much had doubts about that.

Sure, the Royal Knights were unmatched in their ability to protect someone, but these were knights who lived in the light, while the bandits lived in the shadows. These two factions belonged to completely different worlds. Could these Knights really find the bandits who slithered around the shadows of the underworld?

“May I deal the last blow to the head of the bandit group? The one called Borguie? I came to this town for that reason and that reason alone,” Alicia said.

“Yes, of course. You may do as you please, Your Highness,” Sepith replied.

The heavy atmosphere lifted a bit at that. However...

Both of the Royal Knights had been facing Alicia this entire time, but one of them—Sepith Pendragon—suddenly stood up and whirled around. His eyes met mine. I had been spying on the audience from outside the door the whole time, and now I’d definitely been caught.

“And, would that boy over there be the notorious Slowe Denning himself? The mage trainee who dared to barge his way into the honorable and esteemed Guardian Selection?”

“Sepith, he’s the warrior of House Denning who caught that mercenary,” Oliver said, warning clear in his tone.

Sepith sized me up, almost as if he was calculating my worth.

No point in hiding now. I stepped into the room and faced the two Knights who now both were on their feet. Tension hung thick over the room once more. Sepith, for one, didn’t hide his hostility towards me at all.

“Sir Oliver, how are you able to keep up such a neutral demeanor?” Sepith said as he frowned. “We have shed blood, sweat, and tears to claw our way to get here, yet this rookie is going to cut in midway through the Guardian Selection.”

“He joined at the behest of the Knight Commander. It is not for us to question his judgment. What is clear, however, is that the mercenary’s capture was just that significant to the Commander. I asked Loco Moco to recount the incident to me directly at the school, and by Loco Moco’s account, this young man stands toe-to-toe with any of us Royal Knights,” Oliver said.

“Loco Moco Highland is a shameless man who *chose* to retire from his position as a Royal Knight,” Sepith spat. “Is there any merit in taking such a man at his word?”

“That’s enough, Sepith. That man is currently Princess Alicia’s professor as well.”

Alicia spoke up. “I don’t mind. That man is, well...” Behind the two knights, Alicia looked fed up. Even though No Face had taken her hostage and put her life in danger, it was Alicia who started saying that even *she* was a better teacher than Loco Moco.

“It is unheard of for a member of House Denning to enter the Guardian Selection, let alone a direct descendant.” Sepith turned to me. “You aren’t off the hook either, rookie. Why did you accept the request? Surely you are aware of the relationship between the Order and House Denning, and their secret non-interference agreement between Duke Denning and the Knight Commander.” Though his tone was civil, his expression was anything but. Man, if looks could kill...

This guy’s so troublesome... I thought. Running his mouth off and acting oh-so high and mighty, but what are you really thinking? Do you already intend to betray Daryth? I know the future, you know! But they’d offered me a chance to make my case, and I planned to make full use of it.

“First, I would like to make this clear: I don’t have the slightest intention of becoming a Royal Knight, much less the Guardian Knight. I couldn’t decline the cardinal’s request because his will is second only to those of the royal family. If you have a problem with that, I suggest that you bring it up directly with the cardinal, the Knight Commander you work under, and not me.”

Since I knew the future, I was wary of Sepith. He didn’t like me before, so his impression after meeting me in person now is probably a bratty kid or something. Oh well, I don’t really want to get along with him either. Besides, to be honest, these two Royal Knights and I are on equal footing here.

Amongst the aristocracy of Daryth, my family was a noble house that reigned at the very top. Every direct descendant of House Denning was treated as an adult once they reached the age of fifteen. Even though I was the infamous human orc, I still counted as a full-fledged adult as far as House Denning and the rest of Daryth were concerned, so I had leverage where other kids my age did not.

I continued. “Second, I am the Fallen Wind. I don’t stand a chance of winning the Guardian Selection, certainly not when the competition is active duty Royal Knights. Or... Sepith Pendragon, was it? Are you really so threatened by me that you think you can’t win against me?”

“You impudent little...” Sepith muttered.

“Sepith.” Oliver cut sharply into the conversation. “The Knight Commander probably wishes to give us a sense of urgency, letting the student who neutralized the mercenary so marvelously join us. The bandit group seems like a much easier opponent than that mercenary, but we still haven’t found any leads to them... I understand you’re anxious over one of the spaces for entering the dungeon being taken, but don’t take it out on him.”

“Sir Oliver, that news is—” Sepith began, but Oliver stopped him with a gesture of his hand.

“It’s fine. It’s common knowledge already, even among the curious

commoners.” Oliver smiled wryly.

“May I ask what you mean by ‘entering the dungeon?’” I asked.

“You haven’t heard of it, hmm?” Oliver turned to address Alicia. “Rumors of the list of final contenders are popular on the streets as well. Have you heard such rumors, Your Highness?”

Alicia shook her head.

However, there probably wasn’t any point thinking about the contents of the trial to become the Guardian Knight, or who would win. Not for me, at least. I knew the future, and in that future, it was this Sepith Pendragon who fought his way and claimed glory in the Guardian Selection.

“I see that the information hasn’t reached the mage school. There’s a man who the princess has taken a liking to, and they are not a Royal Knight. They are a normal civilian... A commoner, and nothing more. They say that man is currently the top candidate,” Oliver explained.

Who could that be? I could hardly believe that a commoner of all people would be the top candidate for the Guardian Knight, but this was coming from Oliver, someone participating in the trial himself. It must’ve been the truth.

However, Sepith Pendragon became the Guardian Knight in the anime. *If that’s the case, what in the world happened in the Guardian Selection?* I wondered. It was beyond me. Now that I thought about it, there were a lot of things that I didn’t know, even though I had knowledge from the anime. It was quite interesting.

“Well then, Your Highness. Now that our meeting is over, I shall take my leave. The next time we meet will be when I drag Borguie, the head of the bandits, to your feet.”

“Mister Oliver? What do you mean?” Alicia was puzzled.

“As you know, my face is known among the citizens, and I am the famous Flower Knight, to boot. My presence at your side could draw unwanted attention, and people might start speculating on your identity. In the worst-case scenario, the bandits might realize that you are Cirquistan royalty.” Oliver turned to Sepith. “Sepith, you are a relatively new face in the Order, and not many civilians would recognize you on sight.”

Oliver continued, facing Alicia again. “Please do not worry, Your Highness. I vouch for Sepith’s abilities. He is a fearsome knight. As for you, young Denning, I ask that you lend us your insight which helped you catch the mercenary.”

“Understood, Sir Oliver,” Sepith replied. “Rookie, try not to get in our way.”

And thus I received two very different kinds of welcomes from the

two Royal Knights.

“You’re taking too long, Master Slowe! Lady Alicia is peeved!”

Just before he left, Oliver suggested that we all have a meal together to familiarize ourselves with each other. He probably sensed the tension between Sepith and me. Sepith nodded, begrudgingly agreeing to his suggestion. But how in the world could I entertain the thought of us playing nice with each other? I knew the future, so I knew such a thing was impossible.

But all things considered, I needed to at least be acquainted with him, even if our relationship was civil, at best.

“Master Slowe!”

“Oink...” I reluctantly stood up from my chair to join the others.

Sepith brought us to a restaurant located in the middle of a residential street. The wooden shop front was a little shabby-looking, and other than the waitstaff, we were the only ones there.

“You’ve brought such adorable young ladies with you. You should’ve taken them to a much nicer place than mine, Sepith. A nice, fancy restaurant, not a place where a single kumul silver lets you eat your fill. Ladies decide a man’s worth based on the quality of the shops he brings them to, you know...” The woman paused. “Oh, but I haven’t seen young ladies like these anywhere in this town.”

It was a little early for dinner, but Sepith must’ve contacted the restaurant about our arrival beforehand. Based on how he chatted amicably with the lady shopkeeper at the counter, I could hazard a guess that they were pretty familiar with each other.

“I heard that Mister Sepith started coming here often once he arrived here in town,” Charlotte said.

“Oh, really?” Alicia muttered. “For a Royal Knight, his habits are surprisingly similar to those of a commoner.”

Perhaps that was the reason why Sepith, who’d been nothing but uptight, seemed to relax the moment he entered the shop. Honestly, seeing his face soften even the smallest bit took me by surprise. The Traitor Knight always came across as tense and strained in the anime.

“Apologies for keeping you waiting while we talked. They’re preparing our food right now, but it will take some time. We’ll have to wait for a bit,” Sepith said.

“I don’t mind,” Alicia replied. “I have to say, Mister Sepith, from the looks of it, you come to this restaurant quite often.”

“I do. I have come here every single day since I started staying in this town. To be honest, the Gordoni Inn where you’re staying is so lavish that it makes me feel uncomfortable.”

“Wow, you’re staying at the *Gordoni*? I had my suspicions when

an extravagant beauty like you came in. Even the chubby boy over there seems to have had a fine upbringing. So you were nobles after all..." The woman trailed off. "Sorry, my restaurant probably doesn't meet your standards at all."

"No, not at all," Alicia assured. "It's true that I don't visit places like this very often, but I feel very relaxed here."

Both the lady at the counter and Sepith looked relieved to hear her say that. What was he truly thinking, though? I wondered. Sepith hailed from a marquess house, a relatively high ranking in the aristocracy that fell above the rank of earl and below that of a duke. He had become a Royal Knight at some point, dashing down the highway of success and glory, but in the end he betrayed his country.

And I knew why. I knew about how deep the darkness in him ran, and I knew the tragic future that awaited him. I knew very well that he hated Daryth with every fiber of his being.

"Sorry for the wait. Here you go." The woman placed our meals onto the stone table before us. "I hope this is to my lord's and ladies' liking, even just a little..."

The meals were simple cuisines, consisting of grilled chicken and barley rice with a side of vegetable soup. Alicia stared at the food, her eyes wide as saucers. This was commoners' food, and it was completely different from the food in Kirsch, where every dish was made painstakingly artistic.

The homely cooking made me feel all warm inside. Charlotte even asked for seconds.

"I wonder if she'd be shocked to find out that her regular is actually a Royal Knight," Alicia murmured across the table.

"Your Highness," Sepith said at length. "This is the only place in town I feel at home in. Please don't joke like that."

Alicia chuckled. "I'll keep it to myself, then."

Sepith's every action was calculated and impeccable, not even letting something as undignified as eating keep him from letting his composure drop. Looking at him really convinced me that I could never become a Royal Knight; it seemed way too tiring to have to be so mindful of yourself every waking hour of the day. Probably when you were sleeping too.

"Forgive me for changing the topic, Your Highness, but I'd like to make a request of you," Sepith said.

"What is it?"

"Please refrain from going out alone. If you wish to do any shopping, you can send out the staff at Gordoni to do it in your stead."

Alicia was silent for a moment. "Are you ordering me to stay and wait obediently in the inn? Sepith, the reason I accepted your

audience was—”

“I understand how you feel,” Sepith said, cutting Alicia off. “But please leave the bandits to us. I wish to avoid putting you in danger at all costs, Your Highness. I *will* bring that Borguie before you; this I swear on the honor of my House.”

“If you’re willing to go that far,” Alicia said slowly after a moment’s pause, “then I understand. I will do as you ask.”

During this exchange, a dark emotion flashed in Sepith’s eyes briefly. I didn’t miss it. So the marquess house of Pendragon was truly the root of his problem, after all.

If I remembered correctly, the hate Sepith had for Daryth stemmed from his fury at his father, the marquess Pendragon. See, Sepith was born a bastard child to a noble father and a commoner mother, and Sepith resented his father and blamed him for his mixed heritage.

Alicia stared at Sepith as well, but probably for different reasons than me. Despite being a Royal Knight, this man had an undeniably dangerous allure about him.

In the anime, Sepith had already betrayed Daryth by the time his character was introduced, so it was strange seeing this man as an actual Royal Knight and not a disgraced one.

“So then, rookie. The Knight Commander has high expectations of you,” Sepith said, turning to me. “How do you intend to find the bandits hiding out in this town?”

“Finding them? I told you this morning that I wasn’t planning on doing anything.”

“If you catch them here, you would be one step closer to becoming the Guardian Knight for the princess. It is the highest honor a noble can earn,” Sepith argued.

“I have no intentions of intruding on your mission,” I said with a shrug. “You Royal Knights are way more qualified to handle this mission, besides the fact that it’s already yours. I only accepted the cardinal’s request so that I didn’t make a bad impression on him or the royal family.”

Sepith’s skeptical gaze still lingered on me. He probably didn’t believe a word that came out of my mouth.

“Mister Sepith, you can believe me when I tell you this guy isn’t lying,” Alicia said. “He really did join me out of curiosity or something. I think he came so that he could sleep and stuff his face all day at the inn.”

“Sleep and stuff my face... Just cut me with your words, why don’t you?” I groaned.

“Am I wrong?” Alicia challenged.

I sighed inwardly. She had no clue about why I came along. I

didn't intend to make her feel like she owed me one or anything, but I *did* kind of come to Yoram for her sake. *I mean, I'm just here in Shuya's stead, basically. Nothing more, nothing less.*

On top of that, I hadn't counted on a wild card like Sepith showing up, so I wanted to make sure that he didn't get too chummy with Alicia. I had to keep an eye on him from now on.

"I mean, you're not wrong, but you could be nicer about it!"

In the anime, Sepith sided with the Dustour Empire so that he could tear down the wall between nobles and commoners. Honestly, I didn't think that was such a bad thing. For a bastard child like Sepith, being brought up in Daryth's rigid social structure was probably pretty painful. As a pure-blood noble, nothing I could say would change his opinion and prevent him from betraying the princess and Daryth.

I hated him not for his ends, but for the means he used to get there. This asshole kidnapped the princess and tried to sell her off to Dustour. That was why I didn't want him to get close to Alicia. *Hmm... Ugh, what I wouldn't give to do something, anything, about Sepith right here, right now.*

Sepith turned to Charlotte. "Charlotte, right? As his retainer, do his words ring true to you?" he asked.

"Huh? Me? Um... Yes. I think Master Slowe honestly doesn't want to become the Guardian Knight," Charlotte replied meekly.

A beam of light from the window shone gently down on Charlotte as she munched on vegetables blissfully. Alicia, Charlotte, and—though I detested him for that fact—Sepith were all beautiful, a feast for the eyes. It was almost as if I were at a dinner party held by the royal family.

Sepith suddenly paused in the middle of his meal, turning his attention on Charlotte once more. "May I ask you something, miss?" he asked at length.

"Um... Me?"

"This might be a little blunt, but... Are you really a retainer of House Denning?"

Charlotte froze. "Huh?"

"You are very different from the Denning retainers I know, so I couldn't help but ask. I apologize if that was insensitive of me," Sepith said. "I just simply cannot wrap my head around the idea of a retainer of House Denning showing vulnerability in public. I can't say I'd ever expected to see one munching so happily on vegetables like you are."

"Mister Sepith, Miss Charlotte is genuinely Piggy Slowe's personal retainer," Alicia said.

Sepith paused. "From what I have heard, Duke Denning handpicks the personal retainers for his direct descendents himself, but..."

"Miss Charlotte is a special case. *This* guy," she said, gesturing

broadly at me, “made the decision without his father’s knowledge or permission.”

Charlotte had caught Sepith’s interest. *Tsk, she didn’t need to point that out*, I thought, annoyed.

“Rookie, why did you pick her as your personal retainer?”

“You know, I was curious about that too. I’ve asked you about it before, but it never felt like you ever gave me a straight answer,” Alicia said.

“Uh, um, well...” Charlotte shrunk into herself, looking troubled by the sudden attention on her.

House Denning brushed off my decision as the whims of a child, and that was how I explained it to Charlotte too. To my trusted companions, though, I confided that Charlotte was special to me, like I did to Silva in that dream I had. *What do I say to get them off Charlotte’s back?*

Before I could say anything, Sepith shook his head. “No, Your Highness, let us refrain. Clearly we have caused her unnecessary distress.”

“Huh? Aren’t you curious, Mister Sepith?” Alicia asked.

“It seems that there is a long story behind this. Surely they both have their reasons that we’re not privy to, and I think it best we leave it at that.”

Seizing the opportunity to lighten the mood, I turned to Sepith. “The more important question is, who’s footing the bill here? I don’t have any money, just so you know.”



Slowe Denning and Alicia Bulla Dia Cirquista were formerly engaged, but it was a well-known fact that their relationship had collapsed beyond repair long ago.

“Piggy Slowe, let me make this clear. Don’t think that I forgave you just because of the incident with the mercenary. I still hate your guts!”

“...You’ve said that several dozen times already since we got here,” he complained.

Alicia had lost track of how many times they’d had this exchange, but it was important to her to drill this point home.

She would emphasize this over and over again until it stuck. Though they used to be engaged, they were nothing more than classmates at the same mage school. Even if both of them were born to prestigious families, Alicia was born to one of the most esteemed royal families in the world. She existed on an entirely different level from Slowe.

Even if they lived under the same roof, he was still beneath her in standing, so it was rare for Alicia to take the initiative to start a conversation with the boy.

“Master Slowe, please tell me when you practice magic! Pinky promise!” Charlotte pleaded.

“Okay, Charlotte. I will. You know, you don’t *have* to help out with chores here like you did in the school— Aaand she’s off. Ha ha, Charlotte’s so impatient.”

Despite all the reasons not to even give the boy a second thought, however, Alicia had been watching his every move like a hawk. What did he just eat? What was he talking about with his retainer? She watched it all intently. Maybe a little *too* intently, as the atmosphere in the room became tense and awkward.

The boy’s personal retainer had asked the inn staff whether there was anything she could do to help out, maybe to help ease some of that tension in the air. Tina’s mom had gushed and told her she’d love to have such a lovely girl help out. Apparently, Charlotte ended up at the reception desk, greeting everyone who came through the door with a beaming smile.

Once she was gone, it was finally just the two of them—Alicia and her former fiancé. Alicia finally had an opportunity to talk with him about everything that had happened up until now, but...

“Making a mini earth golem with clay for your homework, huh?” the boy muttered.

“The professor told me that I was improving really quickly, but what do you think, Lord Denning?” asked Tina eagerly.

“You’re doing *very* well for a mage who’s only been using magic for a few weeks. You aren’t just able to give the golem a specific shape, you’re even able to make it move! That’s amazing.”

Two small earth golems, each no bigger than a fist, marched across the carpet that lined the inn’s floor. One of the golems started performing little gymnastic moves with a shocking amount of grace.

“Wow, your mini golem can even do a right-about-face!” the girl exclaimed.

“I can even make it do an Arabian flip! Or complex martial arts, even!”

Piggy Slowe and a commoner girl—who was apparently the innkeeper’s only child—were using magic to create earth golems and making them move. Alicia had been surprised to learn that not only could this commoner use magic, but that the girl was a first-year student at Kirsch.

The girl had said that she took advantage of the long weekend this week to come back home.

“Oh yeah, the textbook said that one can tell how skilled a mage is from the material they use to make their golem. Is the difficulty level that different depending on the material?”

“It’s completely different. You can generally tell an earth mage’s skill by how hard of a material they’re able to manipulate. I think that’s why you started practicing with a soft material in class, Tina. But the requirement to be considered a fully-fledged earth mage is being able to make a golem from bronze.”

“B-Bronze? I see... Looks like I’ll need a lot of raw materials to practice with. I’m practicing with clay at the moment, but in the future...”

“Earth mages surprisingly end up tight on money because of the costs of the materials they use, or so they say.”

“By the way, what’s the hardest material you can manipulate, Lord Denning?”

“Me? In my case, when I was young—”

There was a table with drinks between Alicia and the two people absorbed in their conversation on magic. A textbook lay open on the ground beside them as they practiced, the two of them so close that their shoulders almost touched. The sight of the dopey grin on the pathetic pig irritated Alicia even further.

Why the heck is a commoner following him around like a puppy? Alicia thought. *Ah, ow!* Alicia had been sitting on the sofa when a mini earth golem ran into her foot and toppled over, its arms and legs flailing wildly after it fell.

“Ah, I-I’m so sorry, Lady Cirquista! Sorry about my mini golem disturbing you in the middle of your reading!” Tina hastily apologized.

The pair had been practicing a spell that was part of the earth-focused Study of the Six Greater Magics class. Tina’s assignment was to make a mini earth golem with arms and legs out of clay and then to make it walk. Though simple enough on paper, it required very precise and meticulous control of magic. Alicia knew that it was one of the first big obstacles for an earth mage.

Alicia ran a hand through her long, fair hair and said in an indifferent tone, “Well, do your best.” Alicia looked down once again to her book and said nothing further.

“Wow, I was able to make it jump thanks to your advice, Miss Charlotte! I should’ve expected nothing less! I’d heard that you were good at magic, but you’re good at teaching it too!” Staring at her mini golem hopping like a bunny, Tina grinned in delight.

Charlotte looked pleased with herself for having helped guide Tina through the process. Beside them, Slowe looked less than

convinced, watching with a dubious expression and clearly holding his tongue.

"I might not look it, but I've been a mage for over ten years. I studied a lot back at House Denning too, so I won't lose to a student of Kirsch if we're just talking about theory! Doing maid work isn't all that I do!"

"Miss Charlotte, you're so cool!"

"Heh heh heh..."

Slowe had brought Charlotte over to join their little magic lesson, apparently belatedly remembering his promise to tell Charlotte when they started.

"You're quite talented, Tina, so I think you can definitely make it jump even higher! Let's push you all the way to your limits! It's really important to know your limits first when it comes to studying magic!"

"Wow, Charlotte's making sense for once..." Slowe muttered.

"Master Slowe, that's so mean! I always make sense!"

"Well, I mean... I have no idea where you learned some of the ridiculous stuff you talk about when it comes to magic."

Alicia pretended that she was engrossed in her book and eavesdropped on their conversation. She was a dual-element mage of water and earth, so she couldn't deny that she was interested. She leaned a little more towards water magic, but that didn't change the fact that she had to practice earth magic too. But something bugged her.

"I'll try! I'll push myself to the limit!" Tina declared.

"Good luck, Tina! I'm rooting for you!"

Namely, the commoner girl's attitude towards Slowe. Before Charlotte joined them, that commoner girl had been near hanging off of his shoulder, occasionally giving him affectionate touches. Alicia couldn't understand how that problem student of Kirsch could garner such admiration from anyone, much less from a *girl*.

Hmph. He's so full of himself, getting carried away and showing off because a commoner girl is fawning over him... Ugh.

"Go forth, mini golem! Do a big jump! Flyyy!" Tina yelled.

While Alicia had been deep in her thoughts and simmering in irritation, the mini golem leaped from where it stood on the carpet. It cleared the height of the table and soared past it—

—clear over to the sofa and straight into Alicia's face.

"Ow! What in the world...?!" Alicia yelped.

Like a puppet with its strings cut, the mini golem fell onto Alicia's lap and went still. Alicia stared down at the earth golem and connected the dots. *The commoner girl dared to...!*

The temperature of the room plunged, becoming positively frosty. Tina froze, realizing the gravity of her error in hitting the actual

princess Alicia. Slowe hurriedly spoke up in Tina's defense. "A-Alicia... Don't be angry... T-Tina didn't mean to do that, it was just an accident."

Alicia held her tongue for a long moment while she collected herself. "I-Indeed. I know that. Sh-She just has to be more careful next time," she said through gritted teeth.

They say that bad things always come in threes. Of course something would happen while Slowe was in the bathroom for the hundredth time that day.

"B-Blowing up a cute little mini golem?! Really, Miss Charlotte?! Members of House Denning even use something like a mini golem as a weapon?!"

"That's right, Tina. Don't tell anyone else about this, okay?"

Alicia sat cross-legged on the sofa with her book, pointedly ignoring the group and their earth magic shenanigans. They were really getting on her nerves.

"You know all sorts of things, Miss Charlotte. I should've expected nothing less from a retainer who trained at House Denning. You're so cool."

Charlotte giggled, sounding proud of herself. "Though I may not look like it, I *am* Master Slowe's retainer. He's a direct descendant of House Denning, after all."

"Wow, if you shine any brighter you might blind me! Still, House Denning is amazing. Your way of thinking about magic is completely different from mine. Using a cute little mini golem like this for combat never even crossed my mind."

Charlotte telling Tina about House Denning using mini golems in combat was the catalyst for the events that followed.

Charlotte and Tina had slowly but surely gotten friendly with each other at Kirsch. Though Charlotte was treated as a failure of a mage in House Denning, she was still an official retainer with over ten years of experience as a mage. She really enjoyed teaching Tina, a beginner at magic, so she was more talkative than usual as she shared myriad tricks and tips with her.

"Tina, while it is important for a mage to know their own limits, it's also important to challenge yourself by trying new things."

"That's a really wise way of putting it... Okay, I'll try!"

Charlotte had said that one day, Tina might have to use her magic to fight monsters as a mage. Tina, a huge glutton for knowledge, decided to try blowing up her mini golem. She did as Charlotte instructed and made a new mini golem, this time out of wet mud instead of dried clay. It never even occurred to them that this might dirty the room. After placing the mini golem on the table, the two took cover in the bedroom, their heads peeking out from behind the

door.

“Ahem,” Tina cleared her throat. “Mini golem... Exploooode!!!”

After Tina cast her spell, the mini golem on the table blew apart, mud flying in all directions. Tina and Charlotte watched from a distance, their hearts racing.

“Yay!” Tina cheered. “Success! What d’you think, Miss Charlotte?! I did it!”

“Amazing, Tina! Amazing! You really did it!”

It was a huge success. Indeed, such an explosion would serve as an excellent diversion even when facing monsters. However, in their excitement, Charlotte and Tina had completely forgotten about the third person in the room.

“Y-You two! Come out here right now!”

The two froze, only realizing their blunder when they laid eyes on Alicia covered from head to toe with mud. Alicia quaked with anger. They hadn’t gotten mud on just her beautiful face; her clothes were sullied too.

“U-Um... Lady Cirquista... I-It wasn’t on purpose,” Tina stammered.

“You commoner! You hit my foot with your golem, then you hit my face, and now you’ve covered me in mud! Are you *trying* to pick a fight with me?!”

Tina squeaked. “I’m so sorry! Th-That wasn’t my intention at all!” She bowed her head in apology over and over again. Tina looked like a cowering small critter being stared down by a mammoth.

“And *you*, Miss Charlotte!” Alicia rounded on Charlotte, who was still hiding in the bedroom.

“Huh?! Me?!”

“Yes, you! This is mostly your fault! What were you *thinking*, teaching a commoner such a dangerous spell?! Didn’t they teach you not to spill anything you learned at House Denning to anyone?!”

Charlotte froze too. They did say something like that to her, now that she thought about it. She’d completely forgotten that the ways of House Denning were a sworn secret.

“O-Oh no! I-I’m so sorry!”

“Not only that, but you said you were ‘good at’ and ‘knowledgeable about’ magic! But you’re *terrible* at magic! You would hog his time to have him teach you magic, time he should’ve been spending with *me*... But even after all that, you haven’t improved, not one little bit! I couldn’t believe how unthinkably bad at magic you were!”

“Y-You didn’t have to go that far...” Charlotte protested.

“Are you saying that I’m wrong?!”

“I-I mean, you’re right...but, Lady Alicia,” Charlotte said,

hesitating. “Sh-*Shall* I clean your face off for you?”

Alicia was still covered in mud. Her unruly sight didn’t befit a princess at all.

“I’m fine! I’m a water mage, unlike you two. This is just a tiny bit of dirt; I can get rid of it easily with magic!”

With a wave of her wand, Alicia summoned a fist-sized sphere of clear water that shimmered and slowly expanded as it hovered in the air.

“Wow, that’s the Aqua Ball spell, right, Lady Cirquista?!”

“I’m trying to concentrate here, commoner. Be quiet, would you? I’ll demonstrate why magic doesn’t exist just for the sake of explosions.”

Tina’s eyes sparkled at the spell she couldn’t dream of mimicking with earth magic. Water magic was the most glamorous out of the Six Greater Magics, and out of them all, it was the element girls most desired. Tina poked the orb excitedly, showering Alicia with effusive praise. Alicia basked in the commoner’s straightforward admiration.

“But isn’t it getting a little too big?” Tina asked.

“I’m covered in mud all over because of your mini golem, so I need an Aqua Ball around this size to clean myself up. Take a good look; I’m going to summon an Aqua Hand now. I’ll show you why water magic is the most convenient out of all the elements.”

An arm made of water stretched out from the water orb. It began to gently wipe Alicia’s muddy cheek—or it would have if it didn’t ignore Alicia’s commands completely. Instead, it wriggled all over the place like a boneless tentacle. Alicia frowned in displeasure and waved her wand once, twice, and then a third time. With each wave, the color drained further from her face.

“Huh? Hey!” Alicia yelled. “Wh-Wha... This isn’t good! Commoner, get out of the way!”

“Huh? Why? It’s such a pretty—”

The orb of water suddenly exploded with a loud pop, unleashing a jet of water over the room.

The three girls could only stand there, dumbfounded by the sudden turn of events. Tina was a tragic sight, having stood closest to the orb when it went off and taken the brunt of the jet. Alicia was now covered in mud *and* completely drenched. Water seeped down her hair and dripped onto the ground.

Alicia knew clear as day what went wrong. She’d wanted to show off to the commoner, and she’d overestimated her ability to control an Aqua Ball of that size.



“I’m back—”

Slowe snorted, exclaiming in surprise. “Wh-What the heck?! Why are you all drenched in water?! Wait, how did you manage to soak the room like this?!” He paused. “Never mind, I got it... This was your doing, wasn’t it, Alicia?!”

Slowe looked over the drenched, miserable-looking ladies, but quickly averted his gaze when it landed on Tina. He couldn’t look at her straight.

“Ah, welcome back, Lord Denning...” Tina said, quickly followed by a sneeze.

“I won’t bother asking what happened here, so hurry up and get changed so you can go to the baths! I-I mean, you’re all such messes that I can’t even look at you! Tina, you especially! You’ve gotten the worst of it!”

“Huh? Me?” Tina looked down at herself and yelped.

All three girls took a good look at themselves and blushed hard. Their clothes were so drenched, their underwear was showing through the sheer, wet fabric. Even the prideful Alicia had to admit that her earlier spell was a failure. What a disaster.

Steam rose from the hot baths, where the three girls soaked.

“L-Lady Cirquista...” Tina stammered tentatively. “P-People say that failure is the mother of success for magic, and um, I-I failed a lot at first too...”

“E-Exactly,” Charlotte chimed in. “I’m not able to get most spells to go off at all, so Lady Alicia is amazing in my book! The water explosion was really cool. You could scare off a monster and make it run for the hills with an explosion like that!”

For all her big talk, Alicia had completely embarrassed herself with that failed water spell. But instead of getting angry with Alicia at all for the incident, the two girls tried to console her. Alicia’s pride as royalty was torn into shreds. She let herself sink into the water up to her shoulders and closed her eyes, feeling pretty pathetic.

“I’m sorry to you too, Tina. Now that I think about it, Lady Alicia was right. Explosion spells like that aren’t commonly used, so I think you should refrain from using them. Master Slowe often tells me I’m very weird when magic is involved, so...”

“O-Okay, I’ll make sure to not use it at school.”

“Yeah... Also, it would be great if you didn’t tell Master Slowe that I taught you how to explode the golem. When it comes to magic, he’s super strict...” Charlotte smiled weakly.

“Of course. On a slightly different topic, um, have you and Lady Cirquista known each other since you were young?”

“Huh? Us?” Charlotte asked. “Yeah, Lady Alicia is Master Slowe’s fiancée, so...”

“Hold up. Former fiancée, Miss Charlotte, *former!!!*” Alicia cut in. “That’s very important, so don’t forget to make that distinction!” Alicia couldn’t help but shout angrily in response to such nonsense. *Him and me? Still engaged?* The thought alone infuriated her.

Charlotte went still as a statue. “S-Sorry, that’s right. That was in the past.”

“Oh, that makes sense. Lord Denning’s retainer and his former fiancée, huh? That’s why you two seem so conscious of each other.”

“Huh?” The two chorused in unison without intending to.

“Once Miss Charlotte came into the room earlier, Lady Cirquista never flipped another page of her book.”

“Is that so, Lady Alicia?”

Alicia said nothing. In an attempt to hide her blush, she sank further into the bath, up to her cheeks. *She’s an observant one... That commoner notices even the smallest details*, Alicia thought. Not only that, she seemed like the type to tread into people’s personal space with no hesitation, judging from her interaction with *him* when they’d been working with the golem. Tina wasn’t reserved around that boy even though he was from a powerful noble family and even acted casually around Alicia, who was royalty. There were few people like her in Kirsch. Tina was almost as oblivious as Shuya.

Still, to think that she would actually point out the tension between Charlotte and me... You’d think the child of an innkeeper would have the sense to avoid talking about such sensitive matters! Was this commoner obtuse? Or was there more going on in her head?

“In other words, um... Does that mean that you still like Master Slowe, Lady Alicia?” Charlotte dropped the bombshell.

“Huuuh?! How in the world did you come to that conclusion?!”

“Huh? Am I wrong?”

“You’re so wrong! Completely off the mark!” Alicia denied with fervor.

“Oh, I was mistaken...” Charlotte whispered. There wasn’t a speck of ill intent on her face.

Unlike Charlotte, Tina sensed the incoming danger and sped through the rest of her bath—which someone in Charlotte’s position would normally do—and gave Alicia a wide berth, preparing to beat a hasty retreat if need be.

Alicia looked at Charlotte, who looked back at her with a puzzled expression. Alicia felt a sense of *déjà vu*. *Ah, that’s right. This is why I hated this girl when I was young. She is pure to her core, has no malice, is airheaded and oblivious, and—*

“Miss Charlotte, let me make myself clear. Ever since you were

young, you've been like this! For example—" Grumbling, Alicia went off on Charlotte. She held nothing back, saying things like, "You never think before you speak," and "Why are you so oblivious?!" Alicia let Charlotte have it, and Charlotte shrunk into herself and mumbled many and varied apologies.

Charlotte seemed to have forgotten all about the things about their childhood that Alicia pointed out. The moment Alicia paused in her tirade, Charlotte slipped so easily back into relaxation mode. It was almost startling, and it made Alicia realize that she was the only one still fixated on the past. The moment she realized that, all tension left her body and her words trailed off.

Seeing Alicia had suddenly gone quiet, Charlotte tilted her head, puzzled. "Um, Lady Alicia?"

Oh yeah... Alicia thought back on the past. When Slowe first changed for the worse, I was so sure that Charlotte would know why. But no matter how many times I interrogated her about it, Charlotte insisted that she didn't know the reason behind his sudden change, despite being his personal retainer.

After that, Alicia had thought this way for a long time: *If I'd been in her position, where I could always be at his side...I would've figured out the reason behind his change in a heartbeat.*

I always looked down at Charlotte, thought that she was useless as a retainer—that she wasn't much different from a simple maid.

"In other words, I don't have any feelings left for him," Alicia finished. "This is really important, so I want you to *make sure* you don't get the wrong idea, Miss Charlotte."

"Y-Yes, you're right... I'm sorry, Master Slowe caused you lots of trouble..."

In the end, Alicia thought, nobody knows why he became the Fallen Prodigy of Wind.

The engagement between House Denning and the Cirquistan royal family dissolved long ago. *I can't change what happened. Just how long am I going to let myself be shackled by the illusions of the past?* Alicia felt a jab of self-deprecation in her heart.

I've always been chained down by the past.

With that thought, Alicia's anger towards Charlotte suddenly calmed, and she sighed. "It doesn't matter anymore... Miss Charlotte, I will teach you magic properly and thoroughly sometime. You can't walk with your head held high as a retainer of House Denning if you don't improve your skills at magic."

"Wait, really? That would be a huge help! I actually have quite a hard time being confident..." Charlotte muttered with a tinge of sadness.

"You're so lucky, Miss Charlotte," Tina sighed with longing.

“That includes you too, commoner. I’ll show you at school that mistakes like the one earlier happen only once in a blue moon when I’m my usual self.”

Hearing Alicia’s declaration, the two girls beamed immediately. Seeing that, somewhere in Alicia’s heart, she felt a spark of warmth gently spread. It was a strange feeling.

Later that night, a girl with silver hair slept soundly, breathing deeply in and out.

Her face is pretty even when she’s sleeping, Alicia thought. She stealthily leaned towards Charlotte to observe her up close. *This girl is really, really cute. Each and every part of her is like a piece of beautiful artwork, each stroke painted with care.* Alicia nearly let a sigh escape her.

If Alicia remembered right, Charlotte was of common birth, and yet, she was *this* pretty. If she hadn’t been affiliated with House Denning with all its warriors, and was born and raised in a more normal household, rumors of her looks would’ve spread through the entire country.

The pig snorted in his sleep. “Stop it... Great Spirit... I will...” He was sleeping on a sofa in the living room, his sleepy mumbling drifting into the bedroom she and Charlotte were sharing. *Huh, he snorts in his sleep too.* That was a new discovery for Alicia.

She heaved a deep sigh. What Charlotte had said to her in the baths just wouldn’t leave her head, and it was keeping her awake. *Do I still like him, you ask?* Alicia thought indignantly. Charlotte was very insensitive, just like her master.

No. I don’t like him anymore. There’s no way I do, Alicia thought. She was stuck in this train of thought for a while.

“Oink... Oink... Yeah... I promise...”

Alicia sighed. “I’m here thinking my head off, but he’s probably sleeping without a care in the world...” she mumbled.

Being members of a duke house and of foreign royalty respectively, he and Alicia were special even in Kirsch, where nobles of high status were plentiful. If anything of interest happened regarding either of them, it would be the hottest topic on the rumor mill by daybreak. She never had the opportunity to talk to him one-on-one, not with all the eyes on them as there were.

However, whenever Alicia stuck her hand into her pocket... Whenever she felt the cold surface of the engagement ring, she decided she’d try her best to talk to him, but in the end, she never did muster up the courage to do it.

*Even when our eyes met— No, every time our eyes met—
He was always looking somewhere far away...and not at me.*

But especially because of all that, this was an important opportunity for me. I'd decided that I wanted to have a good talk with him if I was able to get him alone in Yoram. There are tons of things I'd like to talk about with him, and I'm not exaggerating when I say "tons." I truly have that much to say.

"...I will be by...side forever... Oink..."

"I strengthened my resolve and my conviction, and yet... That mini golem girl..." Alicia trailed off and sighed.

That commoner girl got in the way. The girl seemed quite eager at that, as if she was provoking Alicia by purposefully showing off how much closer she was to Slowe than Alicia was.

First it was the crybaby Charlotte, his personal retainer, who got in Alicia's way. This time, it was that first-year commoner mage.

What's with all these commoners?! I'm not just any noble, you know! I've got a prestigious royal heritage! Even crying children would stop in the face of such great royalty! Alicia whined internally, her thoughts running wild. *Hmph, I won't waste my time on commoners.* She resolved to hold herself to that, and slowly, she surrendered herself to sleep.

Yet again, she seemed to sleep deeper than usual. It was definitely a strange feeling.



It always felt good to wake up early in the morning. It was like I was getting a head start on my day. There weren't many people around on the streets in the morning, so I could watch the scenery go by as I ran on, undisturbed.

"Oink... Oink... Oink..."

I went for jogs every morning back at Kirsch, and I kept up with it here in Yoram. I enjoyed the peaceful view of the sunlit morning streets, listening to my heavy footfalls echo out into the silence. Even the main street was empty; it felt like running on a track reserved just for me.

I sprinted up the pavement as it wound its way up a hill. *Yeah, I've gotten way more fit.* I turned onto the backstreet and spotted the large men standing in their usual position guarding the gates to the inn.

Today a cute girl had joined them, looking out of place standing next to the burly guards.

"I'm back, Charlotte."

"I wanted to wake up before you so that I could be the one to wake you up. I thought I would finally get to achieve that today, but I wasn't able to wake up early enough again. What ungodly hour do you wake up at every morning, Master Slowe?"

"It's a secret, oink."

Charlotte paused. "You don't have to keep it a secret, oink." She mimicked me as she said it, grinning sheepishly.

She's way too darn cute!!!

"Speaking of which, Lady Alicia praised you this morning. She said she hadn't realized how early you woke up every morning. It surprised her."

"Well, I guessed as much. She's definitely not a morning person. Usually, she's still sleeping even after I come back from my morning jog."

There was a well-maintained flower bed in the middle of the path that led from the gate to the inn. There in the flowerbed lay the Great Spirit of Wind disguised as a black cat, sunbathing leisurely beneath the blossoms. As if they noticed us watching them, the cat cracked open one eye and swished their tail around. Then, they closed their eyes once again and returned to their lazing.

"Oh, it's that dem—I mean, it's your cat. I haven't seen him around lately, but that's where he was hiding, huh?"

"I saw you calling my kitty 'demon cat' to his face once," Charlotte scolded. "Don't bully the kitty. That's awful."

"...Oink."

It's the opposite, really. I'm the one getting bullied. That cat is actually way scarier than a demon; they're the Great Spirit of Wind, a boss even among spirits, which we humans can't normally see. Somehow, even after all this time, Charlotte hasn't realized that her beloved pet is an ancient being.

"So, why are you tagging along with me and Mister Sepith on our investigation?" Alicia said with displeasure.

Alicia was sitting down on a chair in front of the mirror on her dressing table and putting on makeup. Her voice was so clear and sharp that even the hustle and bustle outside the open window didn't drown it out.

An investigation, huh? Apparently, their plan was to use Alicia as bait to see if the bandit group they were after had realized that Cirquistan royalty was in town. But doing that is practically admitting that the Royal Knights weren't able to find the bandits on their own merits and need Alicia's help.

If the situation happened the same as it did in the anime, Sepith was practically guaranteed to pass this stage of the Guardian Selection, no sweat. So how *did* he find the bandits then? That much was never mentioned in the anime. *Something seems fishy about this.*

"Sepith said he didn't mind, so it's fine. I kinda want to know how much intel the Royal Knights have. We're technically rivals."

"Rivals, you say?" Alicia said, barking out a laugh. "Big words for

someone who has no interest whatsoever in becoming the Guardian Knight.”

“You’re one to talk,” I retorted. “Why’d you bother with makeup? You’re just going to walk around town.”

Alicia seemed to be torn about which accessories to wear. She was obviously ecstatic about the sudden outing with the handsome Royal Knight.

“My partner isn’t anything like you, Piggy Slowe. Of course I’d make sure to dress well for the occasion.”

“You call me a pig so much that I’m beginning to suspect you’re a parrot. I’ve lost quite a bit of weight, honestly, because I started doing my weight-loss routine again. I’ve been drinking Charlotte’s weight-loss potion every day too.”

“I can’t believe you’re able to drink something like that,” Alicia said, eyeing me and looking vaguely disgusted. “That weight-loss potion is essentially made of a monster’s body fluids, right?”

“It’s less of a problem once you get used to it,” I said with a shrug. “Plus, Charlotte paid quite a handsome sum for the ingredients and made that potion by hand, so of course I’d drink it. I’ve really thinned down lately, though. My neck, for example. I used to have so many double chins, but it’s slimmed way down now.”

I stood in front of the big mirror in my room, staring at my reflection. I was no longer a pig, having successfully thinned down to a point where I could confidently call myself chubby. It was a beautiful transformation, shedding my human-orc image. If I kept this up, it wouldn’t be too long before my uniform size went down one more size.

“Are you still not done? Hurry up already.” I complained. Though I didn’t see what it was, I sure felt it when Alicia pelted me with something she’d had in arm’s reach. “Ow, hey! Why are you so quick to throw stuff at me?! Didn’t you learn in Cirquista to take care of your stuff?”

“It’s because you’re so insensitive!”

“Insensitive?”

Alicia paused. “I’m going to get changed now! Out with you!”

The azure sky was clear; not a cloud in sight. The blinding sun shone upon Yoram, casting strong shadows upon the ground.

We walked around town under the pretense of an “investigation.” I’d invited Tina to join us if she was free, but she’d declined, saying that she had chores to do. She also mentioned something about it being unfair to a certain someone if she got too close to me.

Tina was due to take the last carriage back to Kirsch later this evening, around the time when we’d be returning to the inn.

Tomorrow she'd return to her normal school life back at Kirsch; I, on the other hand, would remain in Yoram with Alicia and Charlotte for the time being.

"You cherish your family deeply, Your Highness," Sepith commented.

"Not at all," Alicia said at length. "I never actually met that relative before they passed away. I'm only here in this town out of my duty as royalty. Nothing more."

"You are very honest. And brave."

"Is that so?"

"You granted us the audience as we requested and you could have returned to Kirsch any time you wished once that was concluded. Yet, you still remain here in Yoram, where those filthy bandits are hiding. I think 'bravery' is the only appropriate word to describe it."

Alicia paused. "When you put it that way, it does sound a little scary."

If anyone else saw this man talking with Alicia so amicably, they'd never know that he had ill will towards Daryth. I knew better. Though he walked the glorious path of a Royal Knight, I knew full well that Sepith hid dark emotions he kept buried deep inside about the fact that he was an illegitimate child born to Marquess Pendragon and a commoner woman. His blood was tainted with that of a commoner's, and he'd never felt like he belonged in the aristocratic society, where a pure lineage was valued above all else. It was for that reason this man would defect to Dustour in the future, if the future followed the same timeline as the anime.

"You were willing to accept my request for an audience even though it was impertinent of me to make one, and for that, you have my gratitude. Though I have pledged my undying loyalty to the royal family of Daryth, just for this moment, I will act as your own Royal Knight. No matter what happens, Your Highness, I *will* protect you."

"I'm counting on you."

Alicia was blissfully ignorant to how dangerous the man beside her actually was, acting as if she and Sepith were out for a pleasant date instead of working undercover. No one would suspect that this was an investigation if they saw Alicia walking on air like that; they'd probably just assume it was a date, which was the intention, but...still. *I wish that Oliver would hurry up and decimate the bandit group, wherever it is that he's hiding. Hopefully somewhere Alicia wouldn't notice he'd done it.*

In the anime, despite telling the headmaster otherwise, Alicia tried to enact justice on Borguie and his fellows the moment she laid eyes on them, even if it meant sacrificing herself to do it, because of how much she loved her family. The best-case scenario would be for

Oliver to take care of Borguie and his cohorts somewhere out of our sight before Alicia had the chance to put herself in danger.

“Master Slowe.”

“Hey!” I yelped.

“I take my eyes off you one moment, and you buy two skewers. I told you you could only buy one, remember?”

“But...”

I sighed and let my shoulders slump. Charlotte had snatched the kebab skewer I’d hidden while we were walking. Sepith and Alicia seemed to be having fun talking amongst themselves, while I got to enjoy some time together with my beautiful angel, Charlotte.

I guess I should’ve thanked Sepith for that. Since he was entertaining Alicia, I could relax and enjoy this not-a-date with Charlotte under the nice blue sky.

“Hm?” I looked up and locked eyes with Alicia, who had turned around to watch us. Was she making sure that we were still following them?

“Master Slowe, you might have forgotten about it, but the duke is coming to visit Kirsch very soon. You’ll need to be prim and proper when he arrives.”

Oh. That’s right, I’d forgotten all about that.

My mother told me in the most recent letter she sent me that my father would be heading to the school from the front lines. Few men in all of Daryth were as stubborn and strict as my father, the head of House Denning. Many people feared him, and rightfully so. If I made anything less than the best impression on him, he could end my wonderful life at Kirsch in a heartbeat.

“So...I’m taking that third skewer you’ve got in your other hand! You can’t deceive me!” Charlotte snatched away the last skewer I’d hidden from her and promptly shoved it into her mouth.

I was in heaven. Absolutely over the moon. *If only this moment could last forever... Is it okay for me to hold her hand? Would I be going too far? Would Charlotte dislike that?* Though I thought about it, I definitely didn’t have the courage to do something like that. I imagined fantasy after fantasy, but I could never act on any of them. In the end, I was nothing but a timid little piglet to my very core.

“Charlotte.”

“What is it?” My retainer cutely tilted her head in question.

In this big wide world, I was the only one who knew her true identity. Would the day ever come when I could tell my beloved Charlotte that I’d known her secret all along? *We could only truly stand as equals, could only truly understand each other if I told you the truth—this secret that the blackhearted Piggy Duke took to his grave.*

I said nothing for a long moment. Then, slowly, I said, “Are you

hiding anything from me, by any chance?"

"What's with that question all of a sudden? I... I totally d-don't have any secrets hidden from you, Master Slowe! Totally! Cross my heart and hope to die! I swear!"

Well, well. What a suspicious reaction. You're very obvious, Charlotte. Nobody else would suspect that this girl was a princess judging just by that reaction. Still, Charlotte couldn't lie to save her life.

"Let me ask you the same question. Are you hiding anything from me, Master Slowe?"

There was a long stretch of silence. "Oink..." There were way too many secrets on my end. Where did I start? From our first meeting? My powers?

I even had secrets about the first time I met Charlotte. She thought it had been by chance, but that couldn't be further from the truth. It wasn't luck that helped me find the slave auction hidden meticulously deep in the woods on Denning lands.

The truth was, I'd been called there by spirits, many of which had come to me that day begging me to do something about the raging Great Spirit, and I raced into the forest with two knights by my side.

"At this rate, Alicia and Sepith will leave us behind. L-Let's hurry and catch up to them, Charlotte!"

It was there that I found you. I learned that the girl the same age as me was the princess of the destroyed Huzak.

"Wow... I feel like you're keeping lots of secrets from me, Master Slowe."

That's right, Charlotte, I know your true identity. But now that I have turned over a new leaf... I want to stop hiding things from you and tell you that I know as soon as possible. But please, give me a little more time to muster up the courage to do it.

"Well, then," Charlotte began. "Let's just say that that goes for the both of us, so we're even!" She beamed at me *so adorably*.

I fought the urge to shout about Charlotte's cuteness from the rooftops.

A beautiful girl and a handsome young man walked together in front of me. Whenever Sepith passed by the local girls, they turned around and sighed without fail, watching his back as he grew farther and farther away from them. None of the girls could take their eyes off of him. They could probably tell that Sepith came from a noble upbringing. Though I hated to admit it, I didn't hold a candle to him in the looks department.

"Lady Alicia seems to be having lots of fun."

"Jeez..."

On the surface, the pair were doing little more than eating sweets

and shopping around town. But Sepith kept his guard up as he walked beside Alicia, constantly on the lookout for danger. He was ready to draw his cane sword at a moment's notice. I should have expected nothing less from a Royal Knight.

But where I may have lost to him in the looks department, I was more than a match for him in vigilance. I glanced over into the interiors of shops, constantly checking for any suspicious people in the crowd.

So far I hadn't found anything out of the ordinary, but— Oh. Altanger, the Great Spirit of Wind and Charlotte's self-proclaimed guardian, slowly followed us on the rooftops of the shops that lined the street, yawning.

Alicia suddenly turned around, and our eyes met. "Hm?"

Her expression twisted with displeasure, and she whirled back around to continue talking with Sepith. She kept doing that, turning around to look at the two of us from time to time. *What in the world is she thinking?*

"Lady Alicia really likes you, Master Slowe."

"*Huh?* Her? Me? What? How?"

"Um, well... This is just my opinion, so please don't laugh at me if I explain."

I nodded. "I won't laugh. What do you mean?"

"Lady Alicia is probably confused at the moment because of how quickly the distance between you two closed."

"Confused? Why would she be confused?"

"You two almost never spoke, not until recently, anyway. But then that incident with the mercenary happened, and only a few days later you ended up sharing a bed with her! You see? Your distance has shrunk at lightning speed, hasn't it?!"

"Hm, well... I guess that's true enough. But I don't think she likes me at all. She's always sighing when she looks at me."

Alicia ended up with Shuya in the anime, and at the moment, she was absorbed in her conversation with Sepith. I could understand her hating me, but I could barely fathom her *tolerating* me as she did now, let alone liking me in any way, shape, or form. There was no way. She absolutely *despised* me in the anime.

"But if you say so, Charlotte, then I believe you."

"Ah, that too! Master Slowe, you object to what Lady Alicia says, but when I say anything, you accept it without question. Of course Lady Alicia would sulk about that."

Of course I'd listen to you, Charlotte. That much is obvious. You're different from everyone else to me. You, and only you. Once again, it occurred to me just how special Charlotte was to me, when—

A deafening roar rent the air.

I could hear panicked screaming coming from afar, and the sound of stampeding footsteps became louder and louder, like they were headed in our direction.

“Your Highness, please stand back,” I heard Sepith say to Alicia.

On reflex, I also moved to stand in front of Charlotte. *These footsteps... Yes, this is definitely—*

“Charlotte, get behind me. There’s a monster coming.”

“A monster?! In the middle of town?! We aren’t in a dungeon though!” Charlotte cried.

“Lately, people have been using tamed docile monsters to drive horse carriages and stuff like that. They’re much stronger than cows and horses, so they’re pretty useful.” I paused. “Look, I’m right on the mark.”

Something in the distance grew larger and larger until at last it was close enough that I could get a good look at it. A great, horned, four-legged beast several times larger than a cow charged towards us with reckless abandon. It snorted loudly as it bucked and thrashed about, perhaps agitated by the soldier clinging for dear life onto its back.

“Now then, I suppose I’ll stop it here,” I muttered.

“G-Good luck, Master Slowe!”

However, someone stopped me in my tracks. “Rookie, let me handle this.”

“Why?” I asked after a long pause.

“There’s a soldier holding onto its back. If he falls off that thing and hits the ground headfirst, he could lose his life,” Sepith clarified.

Huh, so I wasn’t the only one who noticed him. Sepith did too.

“Rookie, you can use water magic too, right? Unfortunately, I have a limited aptitude for water magic, and I can’t use healing spells. Thus, I’d like to leave that soldier to you.”

I thought about it. “Got it.”

“Mister Sepith, that monster is quite big... Are you sure you’ll be okay facing it alone?” Alicia asked.

“Though I may not deal with them very much as a Royal Knight, I’ve also studied most methods of dealing with monsters. On top of that... I’d like to show off a little in front of my underclassmen from my alma mater while I have the chance.” Sepith answered Alicia’s worried tone with a smile so cool and brilliant that I felt a tinge of ire rise.

Sepith placed a hand on the cane sword at his hip, and with one fluid motion, he moved into a fighting stance.

“Get awaaaay!” The soldier clinging to the monster shouted something, but Sepith Pendragon had no intention of backing down.

“Ice Edge.” Sepith’s quiet chant was drowned out by the screams of the crowds, who were bracing for disaster.

The monster loomed ever closer. Spotting the unmoving Sepith, the monster lowered its head and charged directly at Sepith. Just then, the scabbard at his hip glowed with a blinding light, and—

“O light, release that which binds my sword.”

The next moment, I was blinded by a flash of white light. A short moment later, the world returned to normal, and I peeled my eyes open just in time to see the great beast fall to the ground with a thud. Without moving so much as a single strand of his light ashen blue hair, Sepith sheathed his sword once again.

Alicia and Charlotte stood gaping on the sidelines, stupefied. I guess I would be too, if I didn’t know better. To them, the beast was on a rampage one second and down the next. I found the sight of their mystified faces a little amusing. I was tempted to immediately go over and explain to Charlotte what Sepith had done, but something else took priority.

“Hey, are you okay?” I squatted down quickly and looked over to the soldier.

“My back...”

I’d successfully cushioned his fall with wind magic the moment the soldier was thrown off the monster’s back. *Yeah, he’s going to have some bruises, but he should probably recover soon. Just in case, though, I guess I’ll cast a healing spell on him.*

Still, that was really reckless, jumping onto the monster’s back and trying to stop it like that. I thought he’d be younger, considering the stunt he pulled, but he must’ve been in his thirties, if the big scar on his face was any indication. I continued casting my spell on the man who deserved the title of “tough guy,” and his face slowly relaxed as I eased his pain.

“Oh wow, it’s a mage!”

“What in the world did that man do?!”

Everyone in the crowd had lost their minds over Sepith’s feat, and cheers rose up to fever pitch. After the soldier recovered, I walked back over to the man in question.

Sepith Pendragon’s magical skills... He’d tripped the monster by freezing the ground beneath it with a water spell. Then, he’d used a light spell to buff his strength and enchant the point of his sword, finally delivering a single blow to the monster’s head. What’s more, he’d done all this within the blink of an eye. The townsfolk probably had no idea what had happened, blinded by the bright light of Sepith’s spell as they were.

The Royal Knight lived up to his title; the students at Kirsch were

nothing compared to this sort of skill. How many decades would it take for Lord Pauper, who dreamed of being a Royal Knight, to reach that level?

“So you really were able to use even water magic, huh, rookie?” Sepith said, sounding impressed. He watched the soldier I’d healed with my water spell from a distance. The guy was apparently a high-ranking soldier; now that he’d recovered, he’d taken to barking orders to the younger soldiers to keep the townsfolk away from the monster that lay unconscious in the middle of the street.

“Sepith,” I said slowly. “Why didn’t you kill it?”

I had no clue why he would let a dangerous and aggravated monster live when it posed such a threat to the townsfolk. It didn’t take long for me to connect the dots, though; I’d no sooner asked the question when a young boy tottered out of the crowd and past the circle of soldiers, tearfully embracing the unconscious monster. “I-It’s alive! My dear Cerberooo! Th-Thank you so muuuch!”

“It’s unusual for a Royal Knight to be so considerate to a commoner,” I murmured. “Should you really have done that? You might have just blown your cover, in which case, the bandits will be even more on guard. You have no chance of becoming the Guardian Knight now.”

“You’re right, rookie. I can’t deny any of that... That was quite unlike me,” Sepith said, his lips turning up into a frail, delicate smile. Behind him, I noticed a dusting of pink spreading on Alicia’s cheeks where she’d stood trying to blend in with the crowd and seem inconspicuous.

This incident showed me a sliver of Sepith’s kindness, and I watched the soldiers of this town saluting to him. I couldn’t do anything but stand there rooted to the spot. *I didn’t expect that at all.* What I saw was completely different from the Traitor Knight I remembered.

Hey, Sepith... You were supposed to be the asshole who betrayed this country, weren’t you...?



“Well then, Lord Denning, I’ll be heading back to school first!” The always-cheerful girl with black hair slung her bag over her shoulder and straightened. She’d spent most of her precious holiday weekend helping out at the inn, but Tina seemed in good spirits regardless.

“I don’t know what your extracurricular assignment is with Lady Cirquista, but please do your best!” Tina turned to Alicia. “Also, I am very sorry about yesterday!”

Alicia seemed to have conflicted feelings towards Tina, but for

some reason she came all the way to the gate to see Tina off. If I had to guess, I'd say it was probably because she was bored.

"That wasn't anything to make a fuss about... I don't mind at all."

"Th-Then, um, I have a request, Lady Cirquista! I-Is it okay if I think of you as my friend, like I do with Lord Denning?!"

"Hey, personal space! Ugh, why are you so friendly all the time?!"

Tina completely ignored all general social conventions and got up close and personal with Alicia, laying into her with her best kicked-puppy expression. The fickle, holier-than-thou princess was taken slightly aback by Tina's enthusiasm and finally conceded, nodding slightly.

"Hallelujah!" Tina cheered. "Then, um...L-Lady Alicia! Please accept this as a token of our friendship! When you all headed into town today, I searched around for something I thought you could use right about now!"

Tina pressed something into Alicia's hands. I could almost see Tina's imaginary tail swishing back and forth in delight. *She really is just like a puppy...* Even Alicia—of all people!—couldn't help but surrender to Tina's pure and genuine approach. *I guess that's her natural friendliness at work. Or maybe, that's her secret technique to worm her way into people's hearts, polished by her experiences while helping out in the inn.*

"Oh, that reminds me. Please tell Miss Charlotte to not push herself too hard. The pay here may be good, but they'll squeeze every bit of work out of her in exchange."

After we all returned to the inn, Charlotte was immediately swamped with chores. Charlotte claimed she was extra motivated to do the work because of how handsomely she was being paid. She'd spent most of her allowance— *Oops, Charlotte would be mad at me if I called it that.* Ahem. She'd spent a lot of her *salary* on that weight-loss potion, so she wanted to supplement her income.

"Then, Lord Denning, I'll see you at school! Oh, and..." Tina paused.

After the girls had gone off to the baths together, the awkwardness between them seemed to ease up just a little bit. It was a good turn of events.

"This is my thanks to you, Lord Denning!" Tina continued.

Up to this point, the two guards at the gate had been watching over Tina with kind eyes even though their expressions hadn't changed a bit. However, they both suddenly exclaimed in surprise at the same time, "M-My Lady, what are you—?!"

They weren't the only ones shocked; I was too. The moment I realized what the soft touch on my cheek meant, I flushed bright red, and I could almost feel the steam coming off my face. I squawked out

in a strangled voice, “T-Tina! Oiiiink!”

“I realized this yesterday, but it seems that I was more captivated by you than I thought I was!” Tina said impishly. She wore a devilish smile, as if she had successfully played a prank that she’d planned for a while.

“Please come back to school soon! It’s not fair for you upperclassmen to be the only ones who get to laze around on an extracurricular assignment! I’ll be waiting for you at school!” Tina paused. “Oh wow, it’s late! I need to hurry!”

Energetic as always, Tina ran off, leaving me warmed from head to toe. I cupped my cheek and stood stock-still, snorting. I could only watch her retreating back in a daze.

“That commoner has some nerve...” After Tina left, I could’ve sworn I heard someone mumble a curse. If sound alone could kill, that voice would have managed it twice over. But surely it was a trick of the wind.

...Right?



Tina had returned to Kirsch, and Charlotte was still helping out at the reception desk even though it was already well into the evening. As for Alicia and I, we ended up in my suite, sitting as far apart as we could with her on the chair and myself on the sofa as we usually did. I lost track of how long we sat there in silence—

Actually, that wasn’t entirely correct.

“Oink. Oink!” I still hadn’t moved my hand from my cheek; the soft sensation from earlier still lingered there. Apparently, she’d kissed me as a token of gratitude for helping her out so much with practicing magic back at school. Still, I couldn’t wipe the stupid grin from my face. *Would any girl in this world kiss a dirty orc? No, never. That means I’m being treated as a human, and not an orc! That kiss proved my weight-loss routine is a huge success!* I couldn’t help but snicker to myself, snorting.

“First you spend the whole afternoon smiling all smugly to yourself while we were walking around town, then that commoner k-k...kisses you, and now you’re grinning on and on over such a small thing! How long do you plan on sitting there and relishing in it?! It’s gross!”

She’s more irritated than usual. I cocked an eyebrow at her. *It’d be a pain in the neck if we ended up arguing unnecessarily. Guess I’ll just let it go in one ear and out the other.* After being in Yoram for a few days, I’ve started figuring out how to deal with Alicia.

“Sorry, oink.”

Alicia sighed. “Unlike a certain *someone*, that gentleman is calm

and collected like a mature man of his position should be, and he's able to be considerate of others and not just himself. Sometimes, he even has this somber expression on his face when he's deep in thought. It'd be rude to even compare him to you, whose empty head can think of nothing better to say than your stupid snorting."

"Somber, huh? Oink," I snickered again.

"Knock it off with that gross laugh of yours."

I didn't deign to reply to that. *She's even calling him a "gentleman" now, huh? Alicia seems to hold him in high regard. I don't even need to ask her who she's referring to; it's definitely Sepith. Well, to me, his somber face looks like him revealing his dark side instead.*

Alicia seemed to be really impressed by Sepith's compassionate actions towards that commoner today. Honestly, I sort of understood where she was coming from. His actions certainly caused me to think twice about him too. Now, it was hard for me to connect the Traitor Knight from the anime to the Sepith I saw before me. Even so, he was still destined to betray his country in the future...

"Alicia."

"What?"

"Don't put too much faith in him."

"Mister Sepith is a Royal Knight, and he gave me his word that he would protect me. I can trust him more than anyone else in this town. He's a hundred times more trustworthy than you, in any case."

I sighed. "Listen up, Alicia. A man who'd only spent a couple of years in the Order was chosen for the Guardian Selection. Think about it. That has to mean that guy has the favor of the cardinal, and you *know* there's no end to the shady rumors about that guy. There's no way of knowing what that Sepith guy is actually thinking."

The cardinal had gained the favor of many nobles by masterfully maneuvering around them, and the current queen of Daryth trusted him completely. He was in charge of Princess Carina's education, and at the end of the day, the decision of which Royal Knights would participate in the Guardian Selection fell to him. A person with great political influence like him always had endless shady rumors swirling around them.

Sepith was still a relatively new face in the Order; the cardinal had to have been the one to put his name forward.

"You're being way too harsh on Mister Sepith. Why is that?"

I paused, choosing my next words carefully. "My family is well acquainted with the marquess house. I know a *few things* about that guy."

I couldn't just tell her that Sepith would betray the royal family of Daryth in the future.

Alicia had a good impression of Sepith, which made sense. On the

surface, that guy was the epitome of the perfect Royal Knight. Even the viewers of the anime liked his character a lot too. After all, he was a man who strove to see his ideals realized, and he was kind to the underprivileged. Though he was an enemy, he knew he wasn't completely in the right, betraying Daryth. Even if it was for what was, in his mind, the "greater good." With his dying breath, this pitiful, handsome man apologized to the headmaster, the one who'd recommended him to the Order in the first place.

"Oh, I get it. You're jealous."

"Huh? Why would I be jealous of Sepith, of all people?"

"Well, he's on a completely different level from you. He's a Royal Knight, you're the Fallen Wind. When he walks the streets, people cheer in delight. You, on the other hand? Getting that commoner girl's attention is the best you can do. Hmph. Some people might've put you on a pedestal after you caught that mercenary, but you shouldn't let it go to your head."

"Even if he's a Royal Knight, he's still a bitter bastard," I blurted out.

The air tensed.

I... I ended up running my mouth because I knew his future and what he would do...

"I can't believe you. You didn't have to call him a bastard," Alicia spat.

"Ah, no, I mean—" I stammered.

Everyone had triggers which, if you valued your life, you'd avoid at all cost. For someone as honest and righteous as Alicia, who hated injustice, the word "bastard" was that trigger.

See, Daryth was a country built on traditions passed down from generation to generation. The aristocracy held much of the power, operating based on a clearly defined hierarchy. There was no greater shame in Daryth than being called a bastard, the illegitimate child born not to a nobleman's wife, but of an adulterous affair with a commoner. Cirquista had royalty and an aristocracy similar to that of Daryth, but they weren't as rigid about upholding the status quo. In Cirquista, you definitely didn't call someone a degrading term like "bastard" in polite company.

"Wait, did you actually know about that?" I asked at length.

"He told me about it today. Still..."

"Alicia, wait. I wasn't being literal when I called him a bastard, all I meant was to not trust him too—"

"He was able to get into the Guardian Selection despite being a bastard! That's how amazing he is!"

Me and my big mouth. I had to admit, I screwed up big time. I was so biased, so sure of Sepith's betrayal, that I resorted to calling him

the worst possible insult. No matter what I said to Alicia now, it would fall on deaf ears. I decided it'd be best to give her some time to cool off and quickly made myself scarce, walking out into the chilly corridor.

I walked through the dark alone.

"She's really invested in Sepith, huh?" I sighed. "She's such a handful..."

In the end, Alicia was still pissed at me for the rest of the afternoon and well into the night. She kicked me out of my suite; she was so mad at me. I mean, I could have spent the night in her suite and all, but...

I was in the mood for a walk, for a chance to enjoy the evening chill, that was all. I rarely got the chance to go outside by myself, so I decided on a whim to spend a bit of time gathering information on the bandit group.

Relying on my anime knowledge, I walked on. I headed away from the labyrinth of downtown, passing a more upscale residential district, and ended up in an enormous, desolate graveyard. Before I knew it, I got lost amidst the maze of headstones.

I pulled my hood all the way down to hide my face. I probably looked suspicious enough to be pulled aside for a few questions if any soldiers saw me.

I scanned the horizon, pausing when my eyes landed on a dilapidated-looking building. "There it is." A run-down bar sat on the small hill that overlooked the graveyard, lights illuminating the dingy windows even at this hour.

It didn't take me long to make my way up to the bar. The front door creaked as I pushed it open. The lights were dusty, and the smell of mildew hung heavy in the air. All of the drunkards in the bar turned to look my way as I weaved through the tables towards the counter. This bar was a nondescript establishment where people of certain...*affiliations* gathered and exchanged information.

I plopped down on one of the barstools and lowered my hood. I took out one kumul silver from my pocket.

"This ain't a place where brats like you belong. Come back when you're older and wiser," said the barkeep.

"Punish the traitors and make them pay with their blood," I recited. *Well, then. Let's see if the code words from the anime will work here.*

The owner of the bar cocked an eyebrow at me, staring hard. Around us, the bar slowly picked back up with hustle and bustle among the stench of stale air.

The bar owner was silent for a long while. "You've led a

complicated life for someone your age, haven't you, kid? You drinking anything?"

"Something light."

Just then, a person dressed in all black appeared as if from the shadows, placing a glass of awful-smelling alcohol in front of me.

"You're a noble, right? A son of nobility knowing his way around the underground... These sure are some awful times we live in," the person muttered.

"Oh, shut up," I muttered right back.

The bar I'd come to was called the Black Lobby, the social watering hole of the underground. Information was shared based on equivalent exchange. Nothing was free here, and if you wanted information you'd have to bring something of equal value to the table.

Since I didn't have anything to offer, I had to settle for eavesdropping.

All right, the spirits don't seem like they're interested in anyone around here, so I'm assuming there aren't any mages in this bar at the moment. If there was a very skilled mage in here, there would be the risk of them noticing me using magic to amplify sounds. Once I'd made sure the coast was clear, I used a spell to listen in on the hushed conversations going on around me.

"That sword was definitely..."

"A second...Royal Knight, huh? But...why?...in this town...why..."

They were probably talking about Sepith. *He'd really made a scene, so I guess it's only natural that people would gossip. He showed off his cane sword so ostentatiously, of course any onlookers would have realized.*

"Lately...weird people...come to town. Those guys...this country..."

"...hidden so well...soldiers haven't noticed, but...can't deceive...probably...from Cirquista..."

They must be referring to the bandit group. So they are in this town after all. And it seemed that Sepith's presence had tipped off Borguie and his cohorts. Tch, like as not, they're going to be even more careful because of this.

I sipped my drink from time to time to keep from looking suspicious. I used that as cover to cast my eyes over the interior of the shop, scrutinizing the shadows. From what I could hear, no one had any concrete information on the whereabouts of the bandits.

"That aside, y'all...apparently, they're making solid progress on the Guardian Selection for the next queen. I hear that they've decided on one of the final participants."

"...I've heard rumors...commoner swordsman..."

"You mean that rumor...adventurer...saved...swordsman who inspired that play...princess has taken a huge liking to...the top

contender for Guardian Knight, their name was—”

A commoner swordsman saved royalty? That was an intriguing topic. Though I wasn’t proud of it, I was way behind on rumors circulating in the public because I holed up in Kirsch for the past year. But I was here to gather intel about the bandits and not anything else, so I stopped listening further.

If the bandits were truly hiding out in Yoram like the rumors suggested, I’d really have to stick by Alicia, for her own good. *With the Great Spirit of Wind meowing and sleeping all day while keeping an eye out from the inn’s gardens, I’m the only one who can deal with an emergency.*

During the next few days that passed, my life in Yoram was completely different from my orderly life back at Kirsch.

“Master Slowe, wake up! It’s morning!”

“Oink...” I mumbled.

Sepith would probably find the bandits he and Oliver were searching for and ride the achievement all the way up to the position of the Guardian Knight like he did in the anime. His victory was all but set in stone. There was still the dilemma of whether it was okay for me to let Sepith become the Guardian Knight like this, but I knew the reason behind Sepith’s betrayal. In theory, I could even possibly prevent it.

If I went through all the proper channels and worked with House Pendragon and the Order, we could probably stop him from getting his hands on the princess. It’d be a pain in the neck, but better than the alternative. *Betray anyone all you like, but I won’t let you touch Princess Carina.*

All I had to do was take over Shuya’s position until Alicia gave up this fool’s errand and headed back to school. I could meddle with Sepith’s affairs some other time. And so I let myself relax. I started doing my morning jogs again, and I looked around with Charlotte for good drinks to use as a chaser for my new weight-loss potion.

“Lady Alicia, it is nearly time for Sir Sepith to come for his report. You’ll make a really bad impression on him if you’re late!”

Alicia snored loudly in response.

“Ah, hey, Master Slowe! You haven’t been drinking the weight-loss potion! Please drink the amount you promised!”

“Noooo!” I whined. “The Greasy Earthworm is looking at meee!!!”

“Don’t forget that I spent half of my monthly salary to buy it! I worked hard to make this, okay? Here, drink up!”

“‘Worked hard’?! Charlotte, you just chucked this Earthworm into something fizzy, that’s all you did! Noooo!!!”

Things started kicking into high gear nearly a week into my stay

in Yoram.

Chapter 3: The Small Resolution of a Girl Who Falls Short

The Duchess Can't Be Honest. That was the title of the book that the commoner girl had given Alicia.

Though Alicia felt a little called out by Tina because of it, the book was actually quite a good read. Engrossed, she read through the book quickly, and she was actually in the middle of her second read, nearly there to the conclusion.

“Oink... Oink...”

Alicia mostly stayed inside the inn, day in and day out. Sepith had told her to stay inside as much as possible. According to him, it was the Royal Knights’ job to lure Borguie out, and so he wanted her to wait until that happened. And so Alicia did, reading the book again to pass the time, but... *Is this really the right thing to do?*

I came to this town to bring justice down on the bandit group that killed my relative, and the headmaster approved of my conviction by allowing us to go on this extracurricular assignment, she thought. Yet, here I am, wasting time reading a book I’ve already read. Is this really right?

To be honest, Alicia wanted to sprint out of the inn and track down the bandits herself. But at the same time, it would be rude to get in the way of the Royal Knights, considering the resolution of this mission had such weight over who would become the next Guardian Knight.

Second read through, complete. The protagonist got on my nerves a little because she just wouldn’t say what was truly on her mind, but it all ended happily ever after. The commoner girl was right, this is a masterpiece. Alicia basked in the refreshing feeling of finishing a good book, when—

“Oink... Oink...”

Alicia looked up and saw the obese boy stepping up and down, on and off a small wooden stool. She hadn’t had a proper conversation with him since the day the commoner girl left. *He hasn’t initiated any conversation at all either... What was the point of coming to his room if nothing’s going to come of it?*

Even though he was *right there*, she couldn’t do a thing. The more time ticked on, the more vexed Alicia became.

“Oink... Oink...”

“Hey, you. What’s with you, acting so gross like that?”

Still. Those weird motions of his that he changes up every day...

Though Alicia had decided to ignore him at first, she was at her wits’ end. She couldn’t take it anymore.



I had absolutely no intention of spending all my time in Yoram babysitting Alicia. Since I didn’t have classes to worry about while I was here, this was the perfect opportunity to spend all day working on my weight. It was the best time to work towards my metamorphosis—to transform from a pupa into a magnificent butterfly.

“Oink... Oink...”

That’s right. I will make a super-beautiful transformation while I’m in Yoram, and I will make my triumphant return to Kirsch as a whole new man!

To make that happen, I need to change as much of my fat as I can into muscle while I’m in town! I continued my daily jogs and muscle-building exercises, and even added a new special weight-loss routine to push my body to its limits, all to make that dream a reality.

I couldn’t just huff and puff my way up and down the staircases at the inn, so instead I used a step stool as a substitute. *Though this might seem really simple, it’s actually really effective.* I made full use of my knowledge of modern science from my previous life when designing this training method.

“Hey, you. What’s with you, acting so gross like that?”

“Oink... Huh?! What?!”

She started a conversation with me? *Wow, that’s rare for her.* Even though we lived in the same suite, we would start fighting the minute I tried to talk to her. So I started avoiding her as much as I could so that I didn’t provoke her in any way, but...

“I’m asking you why you’re acting so gross!”

“Oink...! I’m exercising with this instead of training on the stairs!”

Alicia had been engrossed in her book earlier, but it seemed that she already finished reading and had nothing else to do. I ignored her exasperated gaze and continued on to my next routine.

“Next up after the stool training is this!” I had left an elastic rubber tube on the floor earlier in preparation. I held one end with each hand and repeatedly stretched it and compressed it.

My arms hurt! But this isn’t all! I started doing squats at the same time. *I call this my Rubber Squat Routine!* Even so, I couldn’t help but whine in pain. *This is way too tough. A single squat is enough to make me want to give up.*

Without thinking, I reached towards the fragrant sweets on the table—but I stopped.

“Master Slowe! Since you haven’t been drinking the potion I made for you... For every sweet you eat, you have to drink one cup of the weight-loss potion! Promise me!”

My promise with Charlotte flashed in my head. *I’d rather refrain from eating sweets than drink that disgusting potion! There’s no way I can drink that liquid more than once a day...not with that monster wriggling around in it! Not a chance!*

“O-Oiiink! Aaah!” I cried out in pain.

“Since you’re doing that, I might as well ask you now... What are you even trying to accomplish?”

“This! Will straighten my spine! And my posture will get better!” I huffed. “Oh, right. There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you, Alicia.” I panted.

Alicia paused. “What?”

“When I went to your suite next door—phew—you had a bunch of new stuff in there again.” I huffed. “You asked the staff here to go out shopping for you again, didn’t you? But where are you getting all this money from? Wait, did you abuse your status and extort money from people at school—”

“E-Extort?! That’s something *you* would do, not me! This is, well, that! When I came to town, I pawned off the gifts I received from the kids at Kirsch— Uh.”

I was at a loss for words. She’d been selling off presents addressed to her for cash? I froze, shocked that she would stoop so low as toying with the hearts of the admirers who’d given her those gifts. Alicia stammered out all sorts of excuses—that she didn’t have any place to put them, or that they were completely tasteless. Nonsense like that.

Listen to yourself. What are you even talking about? Your room is super spacious. You’re on the top floor of the five-story girls’ dorm where only royalty can live, after all.

“I won’t forgive you if you tell anyone about this!”

Our fellow second-years, many of whom shared classes with Alicia, knew of her true nature like how I did. But the students who didn’t interact with her much didn’t know any better and put Alicia on a pedestal.

“It can’t be helped. Mister Sepith doesn’t want me going out any more than necessary, so I have nothing to do. It’s stress shopping.”

True, Sepith had requested that Alicia stay inside the inn as much as possible. A novice like Alicia digging around wouldn’t yield any real results, so even I could agree his decision was wise.

I shrugged. “Well, I honestly think it’s unlikely that they’ll find the bandits.”

“Why?” Alicia said grumpily.

“The Royal Knights are specialized in protecting people, not

playing private detective. That's not something they're trained for. They haven't even made any progress in the past week, have they?"

Why would Cardinal Maldini send these two here? I just couldn't figure out what he was thinking. They weren't the right people for the job; people from House Denning were much better equipped to handle something like this.

"If you have complaints about that, then just go back to school already. You aren't even doing anything to help out here, after all."

I paused. "You know that if I go back, Charlotte goes with me, right? She's my retainer."

Alicia froze. Though she was royalty, she hadn't brought any retainers to take care of her during her overseas education at Kirsch. Perhaps because of that, she'd made a habit of using Charlotte as her errand girl.

I kept going. "Also, you're just making excuses when you blame it on stress. You're just running away from your responsibilities."

"Watch your tongue. Me? Running away from my responsibilities?"

"Next week, Professor Loco Moco's giving a test in Practical Magic class; you know, the class you do the worst in. You're just trying to avoid that test by extending your stay in this town."

Alicia was at a loss for words. "H-How did you... Y-You're one to talk though, you—"

"Um, Master Slowe, Lady Alicia, sorry for interrupting you in the middle of your conversation, but..." It was Charlotte's voice.

I turned to her. "Hm? What is it, Charlotte?"

"You have a guest. Mister Sepith is here. He said that he has something important to discuss."

Sepith never let his guard or his composure down, his face as impassive as a statue. I knew that he hid a passionate side under that calm facade—the very same facade he kept up even as he outlined his outlandish plan to us.

"We reject," I spat. "Alicia, don't waste your time listening to him."

I had doubts about this whole bandit mission from the start. The Royal Knights lived glamorously in the world of the light up until now; how could they gain information about people who slithered in the shadows? I thought back to my trip to the Black Lobby, that people there clearly had a sixth sense for those who were or weren't their comrades. Even if they were asked for information on outsiders they despised, there was no way they would hand over that intel to anyone who they so much as suspected was a noble, much less these men who were the epitome of nobility.

But forget about all of that right now. None of that matters anymore. If I didn't know any better, I'd have thought my ears were malfunctioning. *The hell did this guy just say?!*

"Shut up," Alicia barked. "Mister Sepith, may I ask you to explain once more?"

"Alicia! What the hell are you thinking?!"

"Silence." Alicia's tone was cold as steel. I felt my heart sink. There was no stopping her now that she'd made up her mind. She was stubborn as a mule and rigid as a tree that grew straight upwards, perfectly vertical with no twists or turns. *Shuya had the same problem dealing with Alicia in the anime.*

"I hear that the bandits are preparing to relocate to another town," Sepith said.

"Why?" Alicia asked.

"It seems that someone realized my identity after the incident with that monster a few days ago."

"That wasn't your fault."

The more well-informed residents in town already knew that a Royal Knight was visiting; after the incident, word would have spread even further. From the bandits' perspective, it was too risky to stay in a town when a knight of justice was around. They probably realized it was only a matter of time before they got caught.

"No, it's my responsibility. I could have handled that situation better. If they evade capture in this town, these bandits will inevitably cause mayhem elsewhere in this country. We wanted to hunt down every last one of them with just our power alone, but they eluded our every effort, no matter what we did. I spoke with Sir Oliver on the matter, and we came up with a plan."

The plan Sepith had proposed stoked the dark flames of the grudge in Alicia's heart, appealing to the devil on her shoulder.

"There is a stage play that's popular with the commoners right now. Sir Oliver, who has gone undercover, would spread rumors that you were here to watch it, attracting them to one of the performances there. In other words, Your Highness, we want you to become bait to draw them out."

Sepith's plan made a lot of sense, and it aligned with Alicia's wishes. But for a *Royal Knight*, of all people, to propose such an outrageous plan! When we first arrived, Sepith swore that he would protect Alicia while he was in this town. *Now, he wants her to be bait?! What's with this change of heart?*

"Mister Sepith, would rumors and hearsay really be enough to make them come out of hiding after all this time?" Alicia asked.

"Borguie holds a deep grudge against the Cirquistan royal family,

as I'm sure you're well aware. Many of their trusted underlings were murdered by the Cirquistan army after he murdered your relative, after all. They will definitely take the opportunity to try and capture you."

Alicia nodded slightly as she listened along to Sepith lay out the plan in that detached, emotionless voice of his.

This is bad. Alicia already trusts Sepith. I can't just let things proceed like this.

"So the Royal Knights are going to make foreign royalty bait?" I spat.

"Sir Oliver and I will be there to protect her. These are mere bandits; they are nothing compared to us."

"Two Royal Knights as my guards? That is an incredible honor," Alicia said.

I felt a headache coming on. Alicia was eager to go along with this plan. I bet she was almost surprised she hadn't come up with such a genius plan herself. *But what did Alicia do when she happened to see the empire-backing Borguie during the middle of battle in the anime? She didn't hesitate to separate from Shuya and even ended up getting herself captured, albeit temporarily.*

"The Royal Knights couldn't achieve their mission on their own and now their solution is to use foreign royalty as bait? Seriously? There's no way you could do that," I argued.

"What exactly have you done in this town to hunt down the bandits, rookie?" Sepith said to me. "The Knight Commander probably regrets putting your name forward right now."

"That's..." I gritted my teeth.

"I came to this town with a strong conviction. You have no right to criticize me when you only came here to play around."

I stared. His eyes were identical to those of the Sepith in the anime; they burned with hungry ambition.

"Seriously, ugh! What were you *thinking*, agreeing to go along with this plan?!" After Sepith left, I immediately rounded on Alicia. She'd only known him for a few days. She shouldn't have trusted him just because he was a Royal Knight.

"Master Slowe, what's wrong?!" Right at that moment, Charlotte came into the room.

I gave her a rundown of the situation, and the color drained from her face. I hadn't wanted to tell Charlotte about such an unsettling matter, but maybe she could help convince Alicia to put an end to this madness.

"Listen up, Alicia. They're just hasty for results because they've spent so much time trying to find the bandits and still have nothing to

show for it.”

“That’s right, Lady Alicia. It’s dangerous! These are very dangerous people we’re dealing with!” Charlotte pleaded.

“While I’m glad that you are concerned about me, not one, but *two* Royal Knights will be there to guard me. Is there anywhere in this world you’d think I’d be safer? There’s no way that the famed Royal Knights would be caught off guard by mere bandits.”

“They *are* strong, I’ll give them that, but...” I trailed off in frustration. *Are they trustworthy though? That’s a different matter.* Sepith started acting on his traitorous intent after he had obtained the position of Guardian Knight and the honor that came with it. Though that was a long way off from now, I still doubted how trustworthy he was as a person. At the very least, he definitely wasn’t fit to be Alicia’s protector.

No matter what happens, he would succeed at this mission. Sepith is going to decimate the bandits. That much is fated. Alicia doesn’t need to intervene with Sepith’s story and jump into the face of danger.

I paused, catching myself mid-thought. *No, wait. Was this how it really happened, and this story just wasn’t shown in the anime? Was Sepith using Alicia as bait to get rid of the bandits how he gained a huge lead in the path to becoming Guardian Knight?* I shook off that thought and continued.

“Alicia,” I pleaded. “They’re just using you for their own gain. You were their insurance for the worst-case scenario.”

Even if this is fate... I still can’t believe that Alicia agreed to make herself bait. She’s the same as she was in the anime. This girl... This girl doesn’t value her life at all.

Alicia paused. “What do you mean?”

From the get-go, I’d thought it was weird they had gone through the trouble of requesting an audience with Alicia. Now I was realizing why, and that Alicia still hadn’t come to that realization. “They prepared for the worst. If they didn’t find the bandits, they would use you as bait. That’s why the Royal Knights requested an audience with you. Greeting you was an excuse to get you to come here,” I argued.

Alicia paused for a long while. “That’s just speculation on your part.”

“Yeah, it’s just my speculation,” I admitted. “But you’re not thinking straight, agreeing to be bait! I’m saying this for your sake!”

The bandits were dangerous, especially their leader, Borguie. Even with two Royal Knights protecting her, these bandits weren’t people Alicia could face head-on. I could understand why she could believe she was safe. They were the cream of the crop from the Country of Knights, after all. But one of them was the Traitor Knight, and even if he didn’t pose a threat right now, he *would* betray this country in the

future.

If only Shuya was around at a time like this... I thought, vexed. Though Shuya couldn't hold a candle to Sepith's abilities, there wasn't anyone more suitable than him when it came to protecting Alicia. After all, he was the protagonist, the main heroine's partner. He had a brilliant track record going for him there.

"For my sake, you say?"

"Yes, for your sake."

Something about my words must have set her off. Alicia glared at me, her eyes burning with anger. I flinched on reflex at the force behind them.

"No matter what happens to me, it has absolutely nothing to do with you, Piggy Slowe!" Alicia yelled.

"Nothing to do with me?! What are you talking about?! Listen up, I—"

—came here to protect you in Shuya's stead.

In the end, I just couldn't bring myself to say it.

"Stop messing with me! Why would you say that to me?! You, the one who threw me away! You ignored me all that time at school, and yet, you...!!!"

"Huh?" I said in a stupor.

She was shaking with anger. Yet, even while shaking, a single teardrop trickled down her cheek. It took me a moment to comprehend that it even was a teardrop.

"You've even ignored me the whole time we've been here! What is *wrong* with you, saying that now?!"

I'd heard this tone of hers somewhere before. For some reason, I was reminded of the angry girl who had her back turned to me in that dream I had.

In the past, I threw away everything that weighed me down because I thought that was what it took to keep my promise with the Great Spirit of Wind. My path to Duke Denning. My bond with my knights. The trust of my lands' people. Even my engagement with the princess of our allied country. I threw it all away without hesitation. Because of that, when I first heard that Alicia enrolled in Kirsch, I was shocked. At the same time, I felt guilt towards her.

"You're just a damned, good-for-nothing pig! What was going through that tiny skull of yours when you said you were worried about me, huh?! You took *everything* from me; I don't want to hear those words from *you*!!!" If looks could kill, she would have killed me with the glare she leveled at me.

I was frozen to the spot on which I stood, completely at a loss for words. I was the one who threw Alicia away selfishly; I couldn't even

come up with a reply to that.

For a while after that, she continued to yell at me. In the end, huffing and puffing, she spat, “Fatty! You damned, fat pig!” and slammed the door after her as she stormed out into the corridor.

I was the one completely at fault when it came to our engagement. After all, I didn’t choose Alicia; I chose Charlotte. I was just reaping the seeds I had sown, and I owed it to her to face and accept all of her anger directly. *There really is an insurmountable wall between the two of us, huh?* Once again, I found myself confronted with this truth.

“Master Slowe,” Charlotte spoke up after a stretch of silence. “I will chase after Lady Alicia, but...”

“Please do, Charlotte. Be there for her.”

Charlotte seemed like she had more to say, though, and didn’t move. “And um, if they go ahead with Mister Sepith’s plan, what should I do?”

“The theater will definitely become a battlefield. I won’t let you go.”

“Huh?!”

“The bandit group is armed and dangerous. They’ll have no qualms about murdering someone with political power, let alone kids like you or me. They’re way nastier than the mercenary who snuck into the school. That’s why I want you to stay here and stay out of it, Charlotte.”

Of course I’d tell Charlotte to stay behind. Even if Sepith were unparalleled against the bandit group gathered there in the theater, Charlotte’s safety was more important than anything else to me. There was no way I’d let her go.

However, she looked straight into my eyes with a determined gaze. *I have a bad feeling about this...*

“I cannot do that,” Charlotte declared.

I didn’t expect those words from her at all. I stared back at her in a dumbfounded stupor.

“I am your personal retainer, Master Slowe. I definitely don’t want to hide in the inn by myself! If you’re going, Master Slowe, I’m going with you!”

“Wha—” Charlotte didn’t even give me the chance to reply before she left me there dumbfounded and chased after Alicia, disappearing from my sight.

Why... Why are you doing this to me too? I was left there standing alone with my mind blank. *Charlotte, who can’t even use magic properly, coming along to the theater?* I never could’ve imagined her reacting that way, knowing how timid she was in the past. Charlotte hated fighting, and she didn’t belong on the battlefield. That’s why I became the

blackhearted Piggy Duke in the first place, and yet—

“How did it come to this...?” I muttered weakly to myself.

“Charlotte’s stubborn at times like this, meow.” Before I realized it, the Great Spirit of Wind, Charlotte’s elusive guardian, appeared at my feet.

“Great Spirit of Wind, you go stick by those two,” I said.

“What are you going to do, meow?”

I... I hesitated. *If Alicia’s mind is set, then there’s no way I’m going to change that. There’s no stopping the main heroine when she gets like this.*

“I’ll go scout out the theater. I’ll make sure to check every nook and cranny so that I can adapt and react, no matter what happens. I might be back quite late. I’m counting on you to take care of them in the meantime, Great Spirit.”



Though Sepith had left the inn once already, he stepped onto Gordoni’s grounds once again. He’d forgotten to tell Alicia something of import, so he’d gone through the trouble of coming back to the inn.

The rest of the Order would be arriving at this town in a few days. If the Order made a public appearance here, the bandits would make an escape. That was why he needed to capture the bandits before that happened, no matter what.

Sepith walked through the gate and entered the large reception hall, calling for the innkeeper. Alicia and the rookie’s suites were on the top floor. Because of the inn’s security, he had to go through the innkeeper every time he wished to even so much as arrange a meeting with either of them.

“I wish to visit Princess Alicia’s room. Does she happen to be there?”

“No, she is currently away.”

“She isn’t in her room? I thought I requested the inn to not let her leave the grounds except in an emergency.”

The innkeeper paused. “Well... Please, head this way. I shall take you to the side manor.”

“The side manor? I see. I suppose it’s true that that’s still on the grounds.”

Sepith followed the innkeeper to the side manor next door. *Despite being near the center of town, this inn is on such a large piece of land,* Sepith observed. He couldn’t even begin to imagine how much that had cost.

Just before he stepped into the side manor, he felt a pair of eyes on him. A black cat, which probably made the garden its home, stared straight at Sepith. Similarly, he sensed the innkeeper peeking furtively

at him from time to time with curious eyes. *She's definitely caught on to my real identity.* Sepith bit his lip hard. *I'm really not fit for missions like this.*

"Does my identity intrigue you that much? No, you don't have to deny it; I can tell. Your assumption is most likely correct." *The Order is coming here in a few days anyways. There's no point trying to hide it anymore.*

"And that may be..." she prompted.

"I am a Royal Knight. Due to extenuating circumstances, I am currently protecting the princess of Cirquista."

"My, my! You really *are* the real deal!"

The Order was going around the trial grounds scattered around the country and selecting the final contestants. Yoram was their last stop. Sepith had long since realized that the Flower Knight Oliver was in charge of overseeing him and deciding his worth.

Sepith still hadn't made any progress on the trial the Knight Commander had given him. He *needed* to convince the princess to cooperate and destroy Borguie and his group before the rest of the Order arrived. Though it meant putting her in danger, Sepith didn't have the luxury of worrying about whether the ends justified the means if he wanted to become the Guardian Knight.

Is this really the right thing to do, though? Is it really right for me to put her in danger for my ideals, even though she is an outsider in all of this?

"It is a dream come true to talk to a great Royal Knight on active duty like this. Ever since my daughter enrolled in Kirsch, we've had grander and grander guests than before! Yes, indeed! Take the princess of Cirquista and the young master from House Denning, for example! And now, even a great Royal Knight, at that!"

Sepith hesitated. "Your daughter attends that mage school?"

"Yes, my girl always said that she wanted to become a mage, ever since she was young," the innkeeper said with a nod. "I never imagined in my wildest dreams that she would actually pass the entrance exams, though, considering how I made her help out the family business every single day."

"She must have worked very, very hard. Still, I'm sure it worries you. It is rather difficult for commoners to live comfortably at that school."

Sepith's expression darkened slightly. *A commoner. Kirsch Mage Institute.* Sepith was reminded of that day that turned his life completely on its head. That one winter night he spent in Kirsch. Even now, he would have nightmares about that fateful day.

"I was worried about her at first, you're right. I often hear about how hard it is for commoner students to keep up with the curriculum.

But recently, my girl was actually able to use earth magic once she started going to school.” The innkeeper sighed.

Sepith stopped in his tracks without thinking when he heard that the innkeeper’s daughter was one of the few talented commoners who awakened their magical abilities.

“Kirsch was originally founded with the purpose of teaching nobles about society. It can’t be helped that they’re a little rough around the edges when it comes to supporting commoners...” Sepith trailed off. “Still, manifesting magic as a first-year? You have my sympathies. You must be very worried about your daughter.”

He had stilled, thinking about the hardships her daughter must be going through like he did, albeit maybe to a lesser extent than a bastard like himself. There was the very real possibility that she was on the receiving end of some nasty things from the narrow-minded nobility, who thought that magic belonged to nobles and nobles alone.

“Worried? No, no, not at all. Judging from what she writes in the letters she sends me every week, my daughter seems to be enjoying her school life at Kirsch. She wrote that every day was a fresh, new experience, and that it was really fun. My daughter is quite lionhearted, indeed.” The innkeeper nodded repeatedly.

“Having fun? Apologies for my bluntness, but... Is there no possibility that she’s telling you white lies to relieve your worries?”

“White lies? Well, to be honest, I thought the same thing at first too. But when she came back a few days ago during her holiday, well... Gathering from all the things I heard from her—” She cut off. “Oh, deary me, there’s a kitty over there. I believe that is Charlotte’s cat, I think?”

The innkeeper paused to sit down on the edge of the flower bed and play with the cat as she talked about her pleasant exchanges with her daughter through letters.

But Sepith was barely listening, his face tense. She’d unintentionally stirred the darkness in his heart that lingered from that day. That day he still had dreams about. *That’s right. That had also started with a letter, one addressed to me.*

On that frosty, snowy night, I tasted bitter despair when I saw that letter from the marquess house. I...I’d convinced myself that even if it meant leaving my beloved mother’s side, as long as I became a noble, I could bring happiness to my homeland. I could endure any hardship as long as that was true, and that was why I became a noble.

And yet, that promise was torn into pieces with just one single letter. Even though Marquess Pendragon—his *father*—had *promised* him, he’d betrayed Sepith.

Sepith’s hatred towards the marquess house then evolved into deep loathing towards nobles who treated commoners unfairly, and in

the end, he started questioning this country's entire society.

"Oh, dear. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have spent all this time playing with a cat. This kitty is really smart, indeed." The innkeeper stood up. "Here, the princess is this way."

My face is probably unseemly right now, Sepith thought ruefully. I'm glad she wasn't looking my way.

Now then, I have to meet with Princess Alicia. I need to carry myself like a proper Royal Knight. Even when he had flashbacks of his worst memory, Sepith was able to keep his calm now, unlike before. *Did that change because I am over it already, thinking that the past is in the past?*

No. No. It's because I don't have any more hope or expectations for this country. Even when I grow old and wizened, I don't think there will ever come a day when I think back fondly on the time I spent in Daryth. Not even the memories of my days as a Royal Knight. Once, I fantasized that I would grow to love this country one day if I led my life as an honorable Royal Knight. And yet...

Mom, Headmaster... Even becoming a Royal Knight wasn't enough to make me love this country.

Sepith followed the manager into one of the private rooms in a section of the manor used as a bar during the evenings, on the second floor of the side manor. He felt a smile tug at the corner of his lips at the sight of the two young girls in a room with an interior that appealed to "high society" patrons.

But that smile was short-lived; Sepith furrowed his eyebrows as the stench of alcohol lingering in the air hit him.

At first, it was only supposed to be one glass.

"L-Lady Alicia, that one has high alcohol content!" Charlotte protested.

"Just a little bit... If I just have a little, it's fine."

Alicia first sipped delicately at the drink poured into her glass. Then, for some reason, Alicia tilted the glass of red wine right up and downed the drink in one go.

"Miss Charlotte, this is delicious!"

"Huh? Really? Then I might have a little bit too," Charlotte said hesitantly. She poured herself her own glass and gave it a tentative sip. "Oh, it really is mild and easy to drink."

It had all gone downhill from there.

"That damned piiig!" Alicia slurred. "Worried about me, he says? Ha, big words for someone who hasn't tried to talk to me at all! That damned piiig! You're way too late to the party, the hell you want with me now?! That nincompoop!"

This had all started some time in the afternoon. They whittled

away the hours engrossed in their conversation, sipping from their wine glasses from time to time.

“Miss Charlotte, did you know this? A while ago, that guy... When that commoner was on her way back to school, she k-k-k—she kissed him! After that, he just wouldn’t wipe that disgusting grin off his face the whole time!”

“Huh?!” Charlotte gasped, taken aback. “K-Kiss?! I haven’t heard about that at all!!!”

“Oh, you don’t know? Well, I guess I’ll tell you, then.”

“Please tell me everything, down to every last detail.”

The two girls leaned towards each other and whispered on and on.



After Alicia had her fill of complaining about that boy, they moved on to talk about their current situations. Alicia confided in Charlotte about her woes at school, and Charlotte complained about how House Denning treated her.

Alicia had asked why she had so few friends despite being royalty, and Charlotte had replied with a perfect answer. “To them, Lady Alicia, you are a person out of their league—too great and far beyond their reach.”

When Charlotte had complained how meager her pay was compared to the personal retainers of Master Slowe’s siblings, Alicia had fired back with an indisputable, “Isn’t that because you’re a disaster at magic?”

Charlotte teared up at that.

“I... I want to keep talking to you, Miss Charlotte. Even at school,” Alicia slurred, a hiccup escaping her. “After all, you’re one of his victims too... Aren’t you sick and tired of being near that kind of guy and being ordered around by him?” Alicia groaned and hiccuped again. “I mean, you’re practically his maid at this point!”

“Um, like I said, I am a retainer, not a maid. But I mean, I honestly have nowhere else to go... Ah, that doesn’t mean I dislike my life right now, though! It’s not like that!”

Sometimes, the two laughed together. Other times, they consoled each other. The two were absorbed in talking with each other, almost as if to bridge the chasm that’d yawned between them for a long time. The empty bottles piled up on the table one after another, a representation of the seemingly endless conversation between the two of them.

And just like that, time passed. Before they knew it, it was nearly sunset. By then, the initial awkwardness when they first came to Yoram had eased up quite a bit. Deep down, they probably wanted to be friends with each other, and at the end of the day, they’d succeeded in that regard.

“You have nowhere else to go? Then, come to my place! Ow... Then, we can have fun complaining about him behind his back together— Ow, my head hurts.”

Alicia was plastered before she’d even realized, the bright red flush on her cheeks giving away how drunk she was. Usually, she only drank enough to taste, but she downed many glasses today to forget her woes, and she just couldn’t stop herself at this point. Beside her, there was a graceful girl with silver hair and an undeniable allure trying desperately to get the princess to stop before she ended up in even more of a messy state.

By the time Sepith came looking for them, the sun had sunk completely below the horizon, leaving the world outside the windows bathed in darkness.

“There you are, Your Highness. What are you doing in a place like this...?” He paused, seemingly taking in Alicia’s disheveled state. “Not to mention, I think perhaps you’ve had several drinks too many.”

Alicia ignored Sepith, opting instead to guzzle down another glass of wine.

“You’re a mess. What in the world happened?” Sepith asked.

“That is well, ugh!” Alicia groaned. “It’s his fault! Right, Miss Charlotte?”

And so the two of them recounted the whole story to him.

I made the right decision, asking Tina’s mom to prepare a private room for us. This way other people can’t eavesdrop on us, Charlotte thought as she recounted the day’s events to Sepith.

Sepith seemed to get the gist of how and why Alicia had gotten so wasted. He turned to her and said, “I have no right to say this, but I think he’s just worried about you, as your friend. There’s still a risk, even if the possibility of the worst-case scenario happening is minuscule.”

“I am a *mage*! And I have *two* great knights with me! You two are a hundred times more reliable than him! Also, ‘friend,’ you say?! I’ve never, *ever* thought of him as my friend! Ain’t that riiight, Miss Charlotte?” Alica chugged down another glass without the slightest bit of hesitation.

Raising her empty glass, Alicia turned to Charlotte. “One more, Miss Charlotte.” Charlotte obliged her, pouring more wine into Alicia’s glass with practiced ease.

Whenever Alicia spoke, she asked for Charlotte to back her up. “You are very familiar with Princess Alicia,” Sepith said to Charlotte as he watched the two of them interact.

“Miss Charlotte is such a wonderful person! That pig doesn’t deserve her!” Alicia downed her glass yet again. “Gimme another, Miss Charlotte!”

“Yes, Lady Alicia.” Charlotte poured, then turned to Sepith. “Um, Sir Sepith, I hope this doesn’t change your opinion of Lady Alicia for the worse.”

“For the worse?! Why is this happening to me?! Miss Charlotte, come on, one more! Oh, yeah, it’s just as I thought, you are—” Alicia hiccuped. “You are such a considerate person, unlike the master you serve.” Alicia hiccuped again. “Ooh, pretty butterflies... Hey, you guys can see them too, right?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Sepith said with a nod. “I can see the cute butterflies too.”

“H-How about you, Miss Charlotte?”

“I see them, Lady Alicia.”

Alicia hiccuped. “I see. I’m...glad.” After saying that, Alicia passed out onto the table and started snoring. *Once you get used to her, she’s surprisingly easy to deal with*, Charlotte noted. She’d been taking care of Alicia since they came to Yoram nearly a week ago. Charlotte was used to it now.

“The princess seems to trust you a lot, even though I’ve heard she’s quite the handful,” Sepith said. “From what I have seen so far, though... Were you two already acquainted?”

“Um, well...actually...” Charlotte explained their past briefly: about how they were both very young when they met, about how much had changed because of Slowe’s transformation, and about how she didn’t interact much with Alicia anymore because of it. They’d started talking to each other again recently, though, and Charlotte found herself talking to Alicia the way she used to.

Perhaps because of her own few glasses of wine accompanying Alicia in her drinking spree, Charlotte was more talkative than usual.

“How surprising. You’ve been his personal retainer from such a young age?”

Charlotte gently set down her glass. She was used to people’s surprise at the discovery that she was a retainer of House Denning; she’d never once thought she was deserving of the title.

But Charlotte was lost for words when she heard the whisper that spilled forth—almost unwittingly—from Sepith’s mouth.

“But I think what’s most surprising is the fact that...that you are a commoner, like me.”

“Huh? But you’re a Royal Knight, Sir Sepith. Unlike me, you’re a noble. Someone from a marquess house, no less,” Charlotte said.

“House Pendragon took me under its wing because of my talent with magic. In truth, I’m a bastard. Half of my blood is that of a commoner.”

Charlotte was stunned. “A bastard? If I remember right, that’s...”

“A child born of adultery between a noble and a commoner... Normally, a noble would never formally recognize an illegitimate child.”

Charlotte had heard rumors about bastard children. It wasn’t something one admitted to in public; to most nobles, such children were little more than scandals to keep under wraps at all costs. Though it shocked Charlotte to learn that Sepith was one such child, it shocked Sepith even more to learn that Charlotte was a commoner.



The light from the ceiling lamp flickered like a mirage on a hot

summer day.

A commoner assigned as a personal retainer to a direct descendant of House Denning? He had never heard of that ever happening before. House Denning was one of the most powerful noble houses in the country, and it was the oldest, its history stretching back to ages long since past. How in the world did a commoner end up among the ranks of their personal retainers? One who didn't have even the faintest bit of noble blood running through their veins, as he did?

Sepith's interest now lay in this Denning retainer. *I want to know more about this girl.*

"I was taken in by the marquess house, much like House Denning did for you. It appears that we have much in common. To celebrate our fateful meeting, Charlotte, I'll tell you a little bit more about myself. Just until the princess wakes."

The beautiful Royal Knight began his epic tale, starting from the very beginning. House Pendragon had taken custody of him, having heard of his talent for magic, and they had given him the training necessary to become a noble. He'd studied night and day, then went on to become a Royal Knight.

At this point, Charlotte was so focused on his story that Sepith was willing to bet she couldn't even hear the clamor from the bar flowing in from outside their room.

"Sir Sepith, you were talented in magic, but you didn't just stop there... You must've worked incredibly hard to get to where you are today."

"I couldn't bear the thought of being a mere toy of fate, unable to forge my own path. That's why I decided to change myself, to become stronger. Perhaps it was my conviction that made the spirits acknowledge me, and I managed to unlock my ability to use magic. It was the spirits that allowed me to become a triple-element master."

"A triple-element master..." Charlotte repeated, awestruck. "Sir Sepith, you are immensely talented. Wow."

"What caliber of mage are you, Charlotte? You must be awe-inspiring to be the personal retainer of an elemental master. I'm sure that I didn't hold a candle to you when I was your age."

However, Charlotte shook her head ruefully at that, sharing her own sad tale: about how she could use only a single element of magic and how her skill at light magic was half-fledged at best, about how House Denning had deemed her a failure of a mage and how she wasn't even allowed to carry a wand with her.

"I can't believe that," Sepith said at length. "I wouldn't imagine, even in my wildest dreams, that someone like you would be a retainer of House Denning. Ah, please forgive my rudeness," he added quickly. "I just can't shake off the preconceived notion that a retainer of House

Denning must be fearsome. The Order and House Denning are like oil and water, so I know a lot about them since they are our enemy. I never thought that I'd find a maiden like you among the ranks of our enemy."

"I see... It's just as I thought," Charlotte said. "That must be why Master Slowe told me to stay away from the theater, to stay in the inn where it's safe." Charlotte smiled ruefully once again and continued. "Even though Master Slowe is my master and I his retainer, our relationship isn't at all like what the rumors say. Normally, a Denning retainer acts as their master's shield, like the Royal Knights are the shields of the royal family. However, Master Slowe and I... We're the complete opposite. It's all because I still fall short as a retainer..."

"Does he know of your concerns?"

She did not reply.

"I suppose I should've guessed what your answer would be. I understand. It must be difficult for you to say outright that you don't have a clear identity," Sepith said. "I was like that in the past. A commoner, or a noble... I didn't know which one I should become."

"Um..." Charlotte hesitated. "How were you able to work so hard, Sir Sepith?"

"Me?" *How was I able to work that hard, I wonder? Despite the hellish days I've endured, I became a noble, then I became a Royal Knight, and now I'm aiming for the position of Guardian Knight. What's fueled me all this time was probably—*

"I..." Sepith paused, choosing his words carefully. "I had a dream."

"A dream?"

"There is a large, invisible wall between commoners and nobles. You must have seen a similar wall between the students at Kirsch, have you not? At the core of that is the twisted flaw of this country. Though it has become laxer now compared to before, when a bastard child uses magic like the nobles, they—" Sepith cut off. "I shouldn't be saying this to a lady like you. Please forget I said anything. It seems I've had one drink too many."

Sepith had realized that he'd let his passion get the better of him as he spoke. This commoner retainer of House Denning had piqued his interest, and the most exquisite wine was in stock here. His eyes fell on the now-empty wine bottle on the table and he decided that was probably why he had gotten carried away.

Sepith changed the topic. "I have heard the name Slowe Denning, the Fallen Prodigy of Wind, many times. There were many rumors about him, about how he was a person who had the world in their lap and then threw it all away. Some even said that his heart had cracked and shattered. His Knights of the Twin Wings who served at the

Prodigy of Wind's side... Those glorious days when House Denning was said to rule the entire nation in every sense of the word... All of that collapsed when he became the Fallen Wind, and now he's the biggest taboo of House Denning."

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Charlotte latched onto Sepith Pendragon's every word. For someone to go from a commoner to a noble, then to a Royal Knight, and then even possibly go on to become the Guardian Knight... To Charlotte, his life was nothing short of awe-inspiring.

If I could rival the abilities of a Royal Knight as a light mage, then House Denning would probably consider me a fully-fledged retainer. In reality, though? I'm a no-good mage who can't even control their own spells. A low achiever, she thought miserably.

"Charlotte, why are you—"

"Huh?" Charlotte snapped out of her thoughts. "Ah, could you repeat that?" *Oh no.* She had been so absorbed in her thoughts that she didn't hear a word of what Sepith had said.

"I asked why you're going to the theater. It might be strange to hear this from me since I proposed this plan to begin with, but the theater will likely become a battlefield. We will protect the princess, and failing that, she can use magic to defend herself. Magic is strength. I have to agree with your master; I think that you should—"

"No, that's... I can't do that. I...I still haven't repaid him for...for everything," Charlotte said, looking up from her lap.

"Repaid...?"

"Watching Master Slowe recently, I remembered what was most important to me," Charlotte began. "When I was young, I'd always wished to be by his side. And I took it for granted that we were together."

When Charlotte was a child, her homeland, Huzak, was wiped from the map. Now it was a land long dead, where only monsters dared to roam.

On that day, at that moment, everything was over. Gone. So why am I still here right now? Right now, I'm leading as normal a life as I can, relishing in the little, everyday joys.

Did I get back up all by myself after all that pain?

"Sir Sepith, I'm actually an orphan."

No. No, it wasn't just by my own strength. I was weak and always cried, thinking that the misfortune of the whole world weighed on my shoulders. I cried and cried, enough that I was called a crybaby wherever I went. And all that time, someone always stayed by my side and watched over me. After the loss of her home, her family, everything that she knew—the Prodigy of Wind and his Knights of the Twin Wings were

the only family she had left.

“This is the first time I’ve told anyone outside of House Denning. I have no family. I’m all alone in this world. If I died, I think that there are very, very few people who would truly mourn my passing.”

But now...now, I’ve overcome that weakness from my past.



Sepith Pendragon froze, unable to help but stare at Charlotte. The words that she just said seemed completely out of place coming from a seemingly happy maiden like her.

“If you’ve never told anyone about this...why are you telling me?” he asked.

Charlotte hesitated, biting her lip. “Even now it makes me want to cry when I think back on it. Why did that have to happen to me? But whenever I think back on my past, on all that pain and suffering, I also remember the young boy who stood by me through all of my sorrow.”

Sepith couldn’t even begin to imagine that. After all, he hadn’t been all alone; his mother had been by his side and had showered him with love and affection.

“It’s only natural that you think I don’t act like a retainer of House Denning. But...I’m standing here today... I have the chance to talk to Lady Alicia and a super amazing Royal Knight like you... All of this is thanks to him. I didn’t become a retainer on my own. It was all because he shouldered all the responsibility himself. He was the only one who ever showed me nothing but kindness.”

Sepith was certain his eyes weren’t playing tricks on him. Those were tears welling up in Charlotte’s eyes; she truly wasn’t lying. Sepith had long become accustomed to life in the palace, where every single day was spent knee-deep in lies and deceit. Her words were the truth, and he could tell.

The Traitor Knight stared at the girl, mesmerized. He felt enthralled as if this girl came from a different world—someone who hailed straight from the heavens above. The noise of the rowdy customers in the bar faded, and he heard her voice loud and clear.

“Every day, Master Slowe loses a little bit more weight. I think it’s amazing that he’s able to change so quickly. That’s why I decided that I will try to realize the dream that I had once thrown away. I thought that I might be able to change too, just like Master Slow had changed. I’m really, really grateful that you shared your story with me today, Sir Sepith. Now I know for certain that my path is right. I still want to try my best, even though I don’t have the talent for magic like you do.”

Why? You’re a commoner, right? You suffered a lot, right? You

became the personal retainer of a direct descendant of House Denning by overcoming their hellish training. That's more than enough. You don't have to face more danger. Even your master doesn't want that for you.

But Sepith couldn't speak. *I...I don't have the right to say such a thing.*

"So...what is that dream of yours, Sir Sepith?"

"My dream is—" Sepith cut himself off.

His first thought was taking revenge on the marquess house. He'd planned to become the Guardian Knight and bring honor to the name of the marquess house, and then crush that gilded reputation by betraying this country for the empire. He could think of no more fitting an end for the marquess house that had betrayed him.

As a child gifted with magical talent, he'd sworn to become a noble and bring honor to the marquess house's name. In exchange, the noble house was supposed to use its power and means to save his mother from the otherwise incurable disease that afflicted her.

But the House broke that promise. *And so that's why I will tear them apart.* It was this desire for vengeance that he'd thought of when asked about his dream.

He couldn't tell her all of this. He *couldn't*. It would be imprudent of him to compare his dream to hers. He couldn't sully her ears with such a wretched thing. This young maiden had overcome so many hardships in her few short years, and yet here she was, trying to press on forward.

Her and I, having a lot in common? Sepith almost wanted to laugh at himself. How ridiculous. She is facing forward with dignity and a noble mind. I, on the other hand... No matter how many years pass, I still cannot rid myself of the shackles of my past.

The girl had reminded Sepith of his past self. *When I still believed that my mother was alive... I used to chase after a real dream as Charlotte does now.*

"Sir Sepith?" Charlotte startled when she looked up at him.

"Huh?! Wh-Why are you crying?!"

"Crying? Oh, so it is. I actually am crying."

"It's my fault. I shouldn't have brought it up. Here, Sir Sepith, please take this handkerchief! Even though it's one of my favorites, you can keep it!"

She'd wished to change, and watching her, Sepith felt like he was blinded by a bright star. She didn't curse her past, even though she was orphaned. She didn't envy her master even though he was a genius at magic. Rather, she wished to stand at his side and support him.

It wasn't something just anyone could do. How noble did you have to be to think like that?

Sepith was moved by the girl's resolution. The wine he'd been drinking probably had something to do with it too. *But...* He clenched his teeth. *I don't want to blame alcohol for how much her words affected me just now.*

"Charlotte, you're stronger than you think. To be honest, I feel I've gained more from this conversation with you. To have the affection of a maiden like you... I envy him."

"I-It's not what you think! Master Slowe and I aren't like that!"

She claims she's a commoner, but is that true? Sepith thought. *She's so noble, she almost rivals royalty.* She carried herself with a lot more grace and dignity than the currently hammered Alicia.

Though she was a commoner who lacked talent in magic, she chose to live as that Denning boy's retainer. Her path was riddled with way more obstacles than even his own as a Royal Knight.

"Please allow me to apologize for my earlier rudeness, saying that you were unusual for a Denning retainer. You are undoubtedly just as noble and honorable as any person of House Denning I've ever met. And allow me to thank you for reminding me of something important to me. I had been distracted by a small obstacle before me, and I nearly lost sight of the real dream right in front of me."

Mother, I was just like her once. I finally remember why I once poured my heart and soul into my studies.

At that very moment, the man destined to be called the Traitorous Royal Knight in the future came to a momentous decision.

He reached into his pocket and from it retrieved a precious treasure: the family heirloom of House Pendragon that he kept on his person at all times. His mother hadn't been a woman of many words, but she had given him this when he decided that he would live like a noble. It was the symbol of his resolution.

"This is a token of my gratitude to you. If you wish to change, I promise that this will aid you in that journey." He offered her a small glass bottle filled with a translucent liquid that glowed faintly with blue light.

"This is a perfume of the marquess house, used to convey our resolution to the king of the skies. I've used it, and my mother before me, so there's only half left. However, if you truly wish to change as I did, then sprinkle that onto the wind. Legend says that it will summon a dragon, though even if at one point that was true, it has long since lost its effectiveness. When I used it, nothing happened."

"The king of the skies...?"

"The dragon. The Adventurers' Guild classifies them as monsters of the Calamity species. They reign over the skies in solitude from the moment they're born to the moment they die. Members of House Pendragon would scatter this perfume and make an oath to the

monsters that rule over the boundless skies.” Sepith stared pensively at the bottle. “Making an oath to a dragon that won’t even show up... It’s quite a silly story, isn’t it? I thought so myself, truth be told. But when I tried it for myself, I felt as if there was a dragon up there in the sky, watching over me. At least at that moment, I thought that truly, traditions shouldn’t be underestimated.”

Charlotte hesitated. “Is it really okay for you to give me something this precious?”

“I don’t think there is anyone who deserves it more. Retainer of Denning, you have a strong will, but you haven’t yet learned how to spread your wings. Nothing would make me happier than giving you my precious treasure if it can give you a hand in achieving your goal.”

Charlotte accepted the perfume from Sepith, cradling it gently with both hands.



Though it was objectively light, it felt heavy in her hands. It was almost as if Sepith Pendragon's entire life was imbued within the swirling liquid. Surely the day he'd sprinkled this perfume to the sky and swore to never let his conviction falter, not even before a dragon.

Charlotte stared, captivated by the patterns that swirled in the perfume as it glowed with a deep blue light. And then—

"Ugh, my head hurts. Miss Charlotte, please get me a glass of water." The princess, who until that moment had been dead asleep, lifted her head and groaned. She must've been hungover from drinking too much.

"Ow... Oh, Miss Charlotte, what's that small bottle you've got there? A new kind of wine or something?"

And though Charlotte wasn't privy to the details, Sepith seemed to have had some kind of epiphany. A hint of sadness laced his handsome features, leaving Charlotte more puzzled than she was before.



Later that evening...

Moonlight seeped through the clouds in the night sky and cast a gentle glow upon the land.

"Meow, meow, meow. Yum, yum. Meow."

"Oh, my. Did that kitty just talk?" a woman said with slight surprise.

"Cats don't talk, mom."

"Yum, meow."

"Wait... Mom, did it really just...?"

As Sepith stepped out of the side manor, he noticed other guests staying at the inn feeding the black cat he'd seen on his way in. Watching them out of the corner of his eye, Sepith walked out of the gate and took to the streets of Yoram, ignoring the glares of the adventurers guarding the gate drilling into his back.

The town was cast with the gentle glow of the moon, and it had a soft and peaceful atmosphere.

"Now then, where did that rookie go...?"

Despite feeling the phantom weight where that precious perfume bottle sat in his pocket, he could only feel at peace.

Still, I was surprised that the Cirquistan princess would so unreluctantly show such vulnerability around me, Sepith thought. Was it a lack of self-awareness of her royalty, or was it that she felt completely safe? It's probably a mix of both. This must be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. And so...

"Mother," Sepith muttered to himself, speaking not as the polite

Royal Knight but as her commoner son. "I've made up my mind." Sepith's whisper was carried away on the wind that blew over the peaceful town before it dissipated into nothing.



"Knight Commander, are you serious about letting *that man* take part in the final trial?" a knight asked, incredulous.

"Does that displease you?" Maldini countered with a question of his own.

Somewhere under the same moonlit sky, knights gathered in a protective formation around a carriage as they slowly made their way through a dark forest. Thin clouds shrouded the moon, leaving a misty haze to fall upon the shuddering trees around them. Leading the caravan was none other than the Royal Knight Commander, Cardinal Maldini, the very same man who pulled the strings of the Country of Knights from the shadows.

"Not only did you give the white cape to a bastard, you even allowed him to participate in the Guardian Selection. I know that you favor Sepith, Knight Commander, but...he has commoner blood running through his veins. We cannot suffer a bastard becoming the Guardian Knight to the next queen," the knight argued.

"But his skills are remarkable."

Maldini had a shaved head, and his bulging eyes were sharp like a hawk's. His thoughts never strayed far from the Guardian Selection, the winner of which would determine the future of this country. Right now, preliminary trials were happening all over the country, and he received regular reports from each trial location. However, one thing was slowly becoming clear to him about the next Guardian Knight: the age of pure-blooded, righteous knights had long since passed. There wasn't any point lamenting the lack of a youthful hero. The one person who could weather the storm of the turbulent times ahead...*would almost certainly be the bastard child of House Pendragon.*

Maldini continued. "If Sepith is present when the trial in the dungeon begins, that commoner would not have a chance at becoming the Guardian Knight. Am I wrong?"

The knight hesitated. "We are Royal Knights, not adventurers. Our knowledge of dungeons and their layouts is—"

He summoned the princess from Kirsch and gave her leave to remain in that town. If he has the stones to use a foreign princess as bait to lure out the bandit group, I will be impressed. Sepith is a bastard, sure, but he has plenty of merits to make up for it. He even understands that sometimes he must be ruthless, that the ends justify the means.

His skills are top-class even among those of the Order, as well. Though people nitpick him because of his birth, the blood of House Pendragon still

carries some respect.

“What about *that* matter then, Knight Commander?” the knight asked, changing the topic.

“By ‘that matter,’ you mean...?”

“The matter that pertains to the Prodigy of Wind. I don’t think House Denning is going to take this lying down.”

“*That* was the result of the princess’s insistence. Even House Denning knows they would have to oblige if they heard the truth about her request. But the princess’s whims are quite troubling, ’tis true. To think that she would request for us to permit the Fallen Wind to enter the Guardian Selection...”

Still. Slowe Denning, huh...? Never in all his years would Maldini forget that name. Once upon a time, even Maldini had seen the embodiment of his ideals within that Prodigy of Wind. Though the boy hailed from House Denning, he had once been gifted enough to entrust the country to. Had everything gone according to plan, he would have been the bridge between the Order and House Denning. However, the boy that should have become a true hero no longer existed.

Even now, Maldini struggled to believe what he heard about the incident with the mercenary at the mage school.

The window of a carriage pulled by two white horses opened. Beautiful strands of golden hair glittered in the moonlight, and a hand with glowing pearl-white skin reached out.

“Call for Silva at once,” a girl’s voice sounded out.

Maldini looked over to see a man approaching the princess’s carriage. He wore his white cape loosely draped around his shoulders. Despite his rather disheveled appearance, the sword at his hip glowed more brilliantly than anyone else’s. His long black hair veiled half of his face, concealing half of the expression he was making. The dark cloak of night made it even harder to get a read on him.

“Did you want something from me?” he asked politely.

“Before I left the capital, Maldini told me to keep this a secret from you. But I’ve decided I will tell you about it. According to him, the person in question accepted our request and is now in Yoram.” The girl’s voice was barely more than a whisper.

Hearing what she said, the man thought for a moment. Then, he raised his head, seeming to have come to a decision. “Thank you, princess.”

“No, it is fine. But in exchange, I bid you not tell anyone the truth about what happened when first we met.”

“Yes, I won’t tell anyone about the ugly, frightened face you made in front of that monster, princess.”

She paused. "Good. You are free to do as you wish."

With those words as the trigger, the man gave the reins a snap, and he and his chestnut-brown horse split off from the group at a gallop. The young man on its back leaned down and the horse became one with the wind as it sprinted off down the nighttime road.

"Stop right there! How many times must we tell you to stop acting out of line?!" one of the knights shouted.

The man with black hair didn't stop, no matter how many times the knights in white capes called out to him.

"Oh, I didn't realize." The girl sitting in the carriage looked up at the sky from the small gap in the window that she had opened. "A full moon shines tonight, I see."

The sky above was full of twinkling stars, shining bright like jewels in the inky night.

Chapter 4: The Traitorous Royal Knight

The theater in question, Theater La Cuvelier, was located in the best district in town.

Charlotte and I headed straight to the theater after accepting the tickets from Sepith, who had planned this whole operation. La Cuvelier boasted a capacity of a few hundred people, and we arrived just as the well-dressed guests began to make their way through the entrance.

After walking past the reception desk, we ignored the glamorous lobby and headed straight to the performance hall. Orderly rows of seats lined the room, slanting downward slightly before leveling out in front of the stage. We'd heard that our seats were somewhere in the middle of the general admission seating. Even the cheapest seats cost a hefty five kumul silvers, but those seats filled in the blink of an eye.

"Ah, oops! Oh, dear!" As we were walking down the stairs to head to our seats, Charlotte nearly tripped on one of the steps, but I grabbed her arm just in time to steady her. Unlike most of the other lady guests, my personal retainer wasn't wearing a *fancy* dress, per se, but Charlotte was wearing a longer dress than she was used to so that she could blend in.

We were so close that we could almost hear each other's every breath. I stared hard at the brave girl's face. On the surface, Charlotte looked like any other dainty and graceful girl her age, but underneath her clothes, she'd hidden a knife.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Thank you, Master Slowe... I'm not very used to wearing something like this, and..."

I hesitated a moment before saying, "You look really good in that."

A dusting of pink decorated Charlotte's cheeks at the sincere compliment.

Was it really the right decision to bring her here...? I could have never even imagined in my wildest dreams that Charlotte would take the initiative to head to a battlefield.

A lady's voice reached my ears. "Oh my, whatever are you talking about?" she was saying to someone near her, though I wasn't really paying attention. "This production is a true story. *Mayhem of the Blade*

is about the gentleman who rose to the top contender of the Guardian Knight candidates despite being a commoner because he saved the royal family in a crisis!”

“M-Master Slowe, is there something on my face?”

“Ah, no. No, there’s nothing...” I snapped out of it. “Let’s go. This way.” I took Charlotte’s hand in mine and led her towards our seats.

Charlotte was all tense, though truth be told, I’d expected that. She was way more nervous than she needed to be. *It can’t be helped, considering what’s probably going to happen after this. Though everything seems normal on the surface, I know that countless bandits have infiltrated this theater.*

“You look the same as always, Master Slowe,” Charlotte commented.

“Well, I don’t want to tip them off or give them clues that something is off, that’s all.” I shrugged. “I also kind of want to enjoy the feel of this place until everything goes down. There’s no way I could afford this on my pitiful allowance, after all.” I gave Charlotte’s hand a little tug. “Charlotte, here. Act a bit more natural.”

“Y-Yes!” Charlotte said with a determined nod. “Natural... Natural...” she mumbled to herself.

The theater felt glamorous and dazzling. There was something enchanting about a place like this, like being here made me a rich, high-society person too. Such extravagance made me feel so nostalgic; there once was a time when I was invited to join luxuries nearly every single day, back as the Prodigy of Wind.

Charlotte had appeared to be out of her comfort zone at first, but she seemed to gradually relax as I continued chatting with her.

“It’s just as I thought, Master Slowe. You truly have returned to your former self. I must be very lucky, having the privilege to watch your transformation from this close,” Charlotte whispered, seemingly moved.

As I watched her talk, a question occurred to me. “Charlotte, do you prefer the current me or the previous me?” I asked.

“Huh? Well, I don’t think anyone would say that they prefer your previous self...” She trailed off.

“Was I really that bad? Everyone goes through a rebellious phase at some point in their life, don’t they?”

“Master Slowe, your rebellious phase was on an entirely different scale from a normal one, and it lasted ages. Because of that, I’ve been wondering how the duke and your mother would react if they saw you now. I’ve been thinking about it every night before I go to sleep recently.”

“Oh yeah, speaking of which, my father is heading here right now, huh? He just straight up abandoned the front lines to come here. Jeez,

what was he thinking?"

"That just goes to show how much he wants to meet with you, Master Slowe."

I didn't have a response to that. I decided to change the topic. "Where are Alicia and the others?" I asked. "They're not sitting in the general admission seating, right?"

"Um, if I remember correctly... Oh!" Charlotte exclaimed. "Master Slowe, over there! Lady Alicia is—"

"Shush, Charlotte! People will hear you!"

"Ah, oops!" There was no point in attracting attention on purpose. Charlotte hurriedly covered her mouth with her hand at my warning.

"On the second floor... I guessed as much," I muttered. "There's no reason for her to sit in general admission where there's a crowd of people."

The second-floor seats were on isolated balconies to the left and right of the stage. They were private seats for special guests, usually a group of nobles who wanted to enjoy the show with friends.

And right now, *she* was up there. Alicia appeared from behind the balcony curtains. With her crimson dress and her hair pulled back into an elegant high ponytail, she stood out even in the glamorous La Cuvelier before the show had even started. She looked completely different from her usual self.

Now then, will those bandits take the bait or not, I wonder? This was now a hunt with Alicia as the bait, and it was time for us to wait for the bandits to bite.

"I helped Lady Alicia a little with getting ready for tonight, but she's really beautiful," Charlotte gushed.

"Yeah... She's a completely different person from the girl who lazed around in my suite."

Alicia was so gorgeous that people couldn't help but sigh whenever they laid eyes on her. From the second-floor balcony, the stunning beauty overlooked the entire theater. With a brilliant aura surrounding her befitting the main heroine of *Shuya Marionette* and princess of the Metropolis of Water, everyone had their eyes fixated on the second floor, whispering her praises to each other.

"Jeez, she's the only one who gets to sit in a good seat, huh?" I complained.

"Well, Lady Alicia *is* a princess, after all."

You're a princess too, I thought, but I swallowed those words down. Charlotte was a commoner. Her truth would remain a secret until the day I told her.

"Yeah, she *is* royalty," I said instead.

Beside Alicia, who looked down at the theater with an impassive face, a man with a white cape came into view. Witnessing the

entrance of a Royal Knight, the theater went wild.

“...Look, that’s a *real* Royal Knight...”

“The girl next to him must be the princess from the mage school, then...”

Fevered whispers broke out over the theater.

Sepith stood beside Alicia, every inch the imposing, impenetrable fortress that protected the royal family of Daryth. Though he was relatively new to the Order, there was a majestic air around him that reminded people of a veteran knight who would not so much as twitch a brow, not even in the direst of circumstances.

With the white cape that draped around Sepith’s shoulders, he simply oozed grace and elegance. No one would ever guess that one half of his blood was that of a commoner’s from the sight of him. The aura born of the noble blood he carried was that of an entirely different league. *This* was one of the elite knights handpicked to protect the royal family.

“Look behind them... That’s Oliver, the Flower Knight...”

“Not one, but *two* great Royal Knights at her side...?”

With the appearance of a second Royal Knight, the excitement in the theater grew still further.

Sepith looked down at the theater with a carefully blank face, and people praised how handsome he was. *Ugh, handsome men have it so easy. Damn it, just you wait. When I become a thin, muscular guy, I’ll also*

“Master Slowe, I know I said this before, but the Royal Knights are really amazing,” Charlotte whispered fervently to me.

“House Denning shines when performing their duty in the battlefield, while the Royal Knights dazzle while carrying out their duty in the palace. They both have their charms that make people look on with awe,” I said, trying and failing not to be petty.

The Flower Knight spotted me as he scanned the first floor. He placed a hand on the cane sword at his hip and nodded slightly to me. It was like he was assuring me, silently saying, “Leave her protection to me.”

“To be protected by two Royal Knights... Lady Alicia is amazing,” Charlotte said.

“They came up with this plan. They better protect her or else,” I muttered.

“I honestly thought that you would be the one by Lady Alicia’s side protecting her, though.”

“She’d definitely prefer Sepith over the likes of me. He’s a few times more ‘handsome’ than me, after all.”

Charlotte paused. “I don’t think that’s true. Ah, Master Slowe, it

looks like our seats are over there.”

Charlotte quickened her pace to a brisk walk, and I followed her. We scooted past people who had already sat down in our row and approached our seats.

Alicia’s protection was solid. She had two Royal Knights with her, after all. Our enemies were just mere bandits; the knights were more than enough.

“Master Slowe, I...I really think you should go to Lady Alicia’s—” Charlotte cut off, fumbling for the words she wanted to say.

“What’s wrong?”

“No... It’s nothing.”

Most of the seats were occupied now. It was probably nearly time for the lights to go down and the curtains to rise.

I glanced at Charlotte’s face. She looked a little tense, and that probably wasn’t just a trick of the light. I held her hand; it was trembling slightly.

“Charlotte,” I said to her. “Can I tell you something quick?”

“What is it?” she asked at length.

“I think I was in the wrong, telling you to stay back at the inn. You *are* a brave person. You’re much braver than I thought.”

Now that I thought back on it, this might be the first time that Charlotte completely, directly objected to my opinion. I’d thought for certain she’d wait back at the inn, but she’d turned my prediction on its head. Even though Charlotte disliked fights, she’d chosen the right path as a Denning retainer, even though she could have chosen any other path.

We both fell short in our own ways. In that aspect, you could say we were perfect for each other. However, I wanted to be by her side as my real self and not a human orc. For that sake, perhaps Charlotte had to change too. Somewhere in my heart, that was what I had always thought.

“Master Slowe, do you remember what I was like when the mercenary infiltrated the school?”

“I remember. You were quite scared.”

“After that, I reflected back on myself. You fought so valiantly, and I cowered in fear. I thought that wasn’t right. If any other retainer were assigned to you, they wouldn’t have let you fight all by yourself...” Charlotte trailed off. “You’re trying to change, Master Slowe, so I needed to change too. That’s what I thought. But it’d be impossible to make such a dramatic change like you, so bit by bit... Oh!”

“...The lights are dimming. The show’s about to start.”

A hush fell over the performance hall the moment the lights went out.

It was so dark that I couldn't make out the seats and people around me, but I still recognized Charlotte with no problems at all in the darkness. Her long lashes, her skin so pale that it almost glowed...

"Charlotte, I—" I began.

"Budge over, budge over. Phew, that was close. Almost missed the show. Hey, champ, don't leave stuff on my seat." The voice of a man rang out unexpectedly, and not from the stage. Annoyed murmurs broke out in the seats around us at the disruption from the lighthearted, cheeky voice.

"The *Mayhem of the Blade* with a commoner swordsman as the protagonist, huh? Let's see what this thing turns out to be about..." The man muttering to himself soured the anticipation that the dimming lights had caused.

The young man, who didn't seem to have the word "manners" in his vocabulary, entered the hall at the last minute and sat down on a seat behind us.

"By the way, Master Slowe," Charlotte said quietly, at length. "Is it okay for us to just...enjoy the play?"

"We might as well enjoy it while we're here. You wanted to see the show anyway, right?"

Charlotte nodded sheepishly. As I watched her, I felt a warmth spread from head to toe.

I guess there isn't any point getting all worked up about this whole thing. Sepith is guaranteed to come out victorious, defeating the bandits by using Alicia as bait. But... Something feels off about this. Am I missing something? So the bandits will be destroyed he— Wait. But in the anime, Alicia and Borgue...

"Hm?" The sound of someone whistling behind us broke me out of my thoughts. Though the wolf whistle was teasing, like it was poking fun at the two of us for being a shy couple, it calmed me to listen to it.

Oh well. We'll just have to see. For now, I'll just relish in the miracle that the girl most precious to me is sitting by my side.



For Charlotte Lily Huzak, the feeling of his hands on her arms had made her feel strangely warm inside. Someone had supported her frame, and when she looked up, it was her master. However, up close...for some reason, she had almost thought he was someone else.

Even beside her right now, his face was dignified, and he suddenly seemed so reliable. He was completely different from the person she knew him as.

Shaken, Charlotte was lost for words, and she remembered vaguely that she'd responded weirdly at some point.

"Your Highness!" Heedless of Charlotte's plight, the actor on stage

continued. “Yes, monsters are indeed fearsome, but I want you to muster up the courage to see the outside world! Now, let us head off into the depths of the dungeon!”

And that strange heat lingered even now. Even though the play had started, her eyes were still fixated on her master’s face beside her.



Mayhem of the Blade was all the rage in Daryth right now. It was about a swordsman saving the princess and a few knights who were brought to a dungeon—the quintessential epic tale of a hero. The commoner swordsman defeated monsters that even the noble knights were helpless against.

“This isn’t what they said! Wasn’t the dungeon boss supposed to be a normal Dullahan?!” one knight exclaimed.

“The adventurers deserted us! Please! Is there anyone out there?! Someone help us!” a second knight shouted, pleading.

The story was fast-paced, and the audience didn’t even get the chance to catch their breath as the play progressed onto its climax. At last, the swordsman and the princess had their fateful meeting.

Everyone was absorbed in the play, and even Charlotte watched with bated breath beside me.

“Who *are* you?!” the princess exclaimed.

“I’m a commoner, so, unfortunately, I don’t have a glorious name to declare. Now then, Sir Knights, if you would kindly take a few steps back. This mere shadow of a swordsman has a dungeon boss to kill. That thing is *mine*.”

The incredible performance had all of us on the edge of our seats. Accompanied by the music of the orchestra building up to a crescendo, nobody could take their eyes off the show.

A swordsman with black hair slashed at a monster in full plate armor with his sword as he all but danced across the stage. Nearby, a delicate and beautiful young girl acting as the princess sat on the ground, spellbound as she stared at the swordsman.

“Dude, what’s with her jutting her butt out like that?” Though we were right in the middle of a climactic scene, the guy sitting behind us cackled and muttered to himself. He had also whispered something like, “...didn’t say that.”

Oh, shut up already. I was irritated. *That’s definitely the guy who nearly missed the show. I had a bad feeling when he first showed up, ugh. Charlotte hasn’t noticed since she’s absorbed in the play, but I can’t help but be distracted by this guy’s voice!*

I turned to look at the second floor. Alicia and Sepith were there. The bandits still hadn’t made a move yet, and everything was as usual in the theater. On the stage, the swordsman swung his greatsword

towards the monster for the last time. We were finally at the climax of the story. *Sepith, it looks like the bandits never showed up. Your road to the Guardian Knight will end with thi—*

“Thank you very much, traveler. May I ask for your name?”

“My name is—”

All light suddenly disappeared from the theater, leaving the performance hall engulfed in utter darkness. For a moment, even I thought that it was a part of the play. Then just as suddenly as it went out, all the spotlights lit up at once, pointed directly at the stage.

“The hell is happening...?!” I muttered.

On the stage, everything had turned on its head.

The swordsman had collapsed onto the ground, and the full plate monster next to him stayed upright. The princess froze in shock.

Loud whispers erupted out into the initial silence.

The monster on stage removed the helmet that covered its head and looked over at the audience. The man’s long, gray hair was matched in raggedness by the gaunt and weary look upon his face. He was relatively tall, but the man’s slouch was gloomy and made him appear smaller than he really was. He held up his hand; in it, he clutched a wand.

Something was definitely off, but nobody rose to stop him. As if I was possessed by something, I stayed rooted to my spot.

“And thus,” said the man with a confident, theatrical flourish, “the swordsman did not rise. Now, the prologue ends here.” He carried himself with a charisma that would have put him toe-to-toe with the real stage actors.

The audience whispered among themselves, wondering if this was a continuation of the play. Everyone in the audience had their eyes transfixed on the stage.

But I recognized the face of that criminal.

“And now, the main show is about to begin. Its title is *Mayhem*. I shall make it a fitting play to mark the end of us biding our time in the shadows.”

I immediately reached for my wand, and—

“Citizens of Daryth, my words, my magic will transform you all into actors...” The man trailed off. “*Raging Torrent*.”

A jet of water burst forth from the man’s wand, branching off in several directions as he aimed them at the ceiling. Broken shards of glass from the lights rained down on the audience.



—Or they would have, if not for the flames surrounding the currents of water, rendering them little more than glimmering

droplets.

The broken shards of glass turned to ash by the remnants of the flames above the audience's heads, preventing the tragedy that would have surely followed. The audience screamed in fear at the enormous heatwave appearing suddenly above their heads.

Though the first phase of *Mayhem* was thwarted, the bandit leader Borguie didn't falter in the slightest.

"The famed Royal Knights of Daryth live up to their reputation. It's truly admirable how they're able to think on their feet, responding to our attack so quickly," he muttered.

This was the end of their time hiding in the shadows. The bandit group had shrunk over the time they were pursued relentlessly by the Cirquistan army. They spent their time underground here slowly inducting more members into their ranks; now, it seemed, they were finally ready to turn the page in their book. They were ready to live up to their infamy. Their first new job needed to be flashy to show off their power to both the newbies among them and to the underground society. The bigger the fish they could catch, the better.

For Borguie, the transformation from the iron-plated monster to a human was akin to a metamorphosis. He might've even gone as far as saying that there wasn't a better stage for the bandit group to rise from the ashes and begin anew in Daryth.

"As expected, the information leaked to us was a trap to lure us in. They wouldn't have been able to react to my spell this quickly if they weren't expecting us," Borguie said, unperturbed. He slowly turned his head and fixed his eyes on the Royal Knights standing between him and the princess on the second floor.

The Flower Knight drew his sword and shifted into a ready stance. There was another Royal Knight on the other side of the princess who looked as cold as ice, one whose name he did not know.

"Two white capes, huh? Though this is the first time we've clashed... Show me what you can do, 'Guardians of the Royal Family.' Everyone, charge!"

The stage was certainly making a set change, transforming into the *Mayhem* that Borguie desired.



"Huh. Looks like you were able to foresee everything, weren't you, milord?" A small whisper went unheard.



"Aaah!"

Pandemonium erupted within the theater.

The bandits sprung into action from their disguises amongst the audience. Though the worst-case scenario was avoided, La Cuvelier was still thrown into chaos. Crowds of people ran for the doors, trying to escape, the flashy spells from earlier still vivid in everyone's minds.

One of the Royal Knights had countered the man's spell, but most of the audience were commoners and were likely oblivious to the fact that he'd protected them. However, in their way, a few men stood in front of the exits, barring their path.

They're fast. No wonder they were able to escape the Cirquistan army. The bandit group was more like a small army than a ragtag bunch of criminals, and they probably thought they had a chance even despite the two Royal Knights around.

Next to me, Charlotte was still frozen in shock. *I guess although she knew what was going to happen, she wasn't truly prepared for it. That's good news for me, though. As long as I'm with her, Charlotte, at least, will make it out of this unscathed.*

Alicia, on the other hand... I clenched my teeth in frustration. *Those two Royal Knights! What are they doing, dragging their feet around?! They're guaranteed to win here!*

I turned towards the second-floor balcony. My eyes widened, and I couldn't help but gasp in shock at what I saw.

"Huh?!"



The famed Flower Knight deeply regretted agreeing to this operation. As a Royal Knight, he couldn't be proud of this brutish plan to lure the bandit group out by using Alicia as bait, and he *knew* that. It was their own fault that they had to resort to such means because he and Sepith were ultimately not up for the task.

Oliver had tasked his subordinates with escorting the mercenary back to the capital, and he'd stayed in Yoram to continue searching for these bandits. Much to his dismay, he hadn't achieved a single thing the entire time he'd been here. Though he had finally tracked down the Black Lobby, there were code words he clearly didn't know, and he hadn't managed to gain any information. For these past few days, he had been filled with shame, realizing how wet behind the ears he truly was when it came to matters such as these. He lived in the world of light; it was impossible for him to truly step foot into the world of the underground.

However, there was still one beacon of hope in this pathetic reality. According to Sepith, Alicia wholeheartedly welcomed the plan to capture Borguie and his fellows, even going as far as calling it "a wonderful idea." Normally, it would be akin to blasphemy to even consider using her as bait, but the princess insisted on going through

with it, and Oliver had been moved by her bravery.

“At last, they show themselves,” Oliver muttered, reaching for his wand. “But they sorely underestimated us Royal Knights.”

As Oliver tore apart the dual-element spell of water and wind that was aimed at him, he looked down over the balcony and scanned the whole performance hall. Gauging the ability of all the individual bandits, Oliver concluded that Borguie’s group was a bunch of unruly, disorganized people. If they lost their leader, their group would immediately collapse. He shot down another one of Borguie’s spells before he gripped the handrail, preparing to leap down from the second-floor balcony.

“Sepith!” he exclaimed. “I will head down to the first floor to take down their leader! Protect the princess—”

They had decided their individual roles beforehand; Oliver would focus his efforts on destroying the bandit group, and Sepith would protect the princess. The most important thing was the princess’s safety. Though Sepith was a bastard child, he was a triple-element master who’d already surpassed Oliver in skill. Even with the label of “bastard” weighing him down, Sepith had poured blood, sweat, and tears into his training, clawing his way up the ranks. Oliver had great faith in Sepith’s abilities, and it was for this reason that he’d picked Sepith for the job.

“Your Highness! Please make sure that you stay with Sepith at all ti—”

Before Oliver could finish his sentence, the blade of a cane sword thrust through his chest, piercing through him like he was made of nothing.

He recognized the blade; the special cane sword given to Royal Knights for use in both spellcasting and melee combat. But he could not wrap his head around what had just happened. *What...is this?*

“Sir Oliver.”

A few seconds later, great pain racked his frame. Coughing up blood, Oliver stared up at Sepith, this Royal Knight who had a bright future ahead of him; this bastard who defied all odds and expectations by gaining the trust of the Knight Commander and the queen, who was even rumored to be the top candidate for the next Guardian Knight.

“I am grateful to you. You were the only one in the Order who wasn’t biased against me because of my blood.”

Oliver’s blood splattered onto the innocent maiden, staining her crimson dress.



Alicia couldn’t understand what was going on in front of her.

Bereft of even a single word, she looked down in a daze at the warm blood that splattered onto her cheeks.

“Sepith, why...?!”

“Farewell.”

And just like that, the Flower Knight collapsed onto the ground at the hands of his comrade, blindsided by this unexpected betrayal.



Huuuh?!!! I witnessed the very moment when Sepith ran Oliver through, and I screamed internally. What the hell are you doing, Sepith?! Aren't you supposed to destroy the bandits here tonight?! Your betrayal is in the future after you become the Guardian Knight!!! You're supposed to try to use Princess Carina for your unsavory means then—wasn't that supposed to be how it goes?! Why are you attacking Oliver?!

Not only that, but that guy just took Alicia with him! I didn't do anything to change his fate, so why is this different from the anime?!

“That looks like that'll sell for some good cash. More importantly, it's small, which is a big bonus. Come on, hand it over!” a bandit demanded, cackling.

“Go away! This instrument is my life itself. There's no way in hell I'd give this to you filthy thieves!” a musician shouted back.

The two Royal Knights were gone, leaving no one to deal with the bandits. *Is the world trying to tell me to deal with that bandit in their stead? No, more than that, Sepith took Alicia with him! What should I do? Should I chase Sepith immediately?! No, bad idea. I can't just leave, not with the theater in this state!*

I lobbed a spell at one of the bandits who'd been trying to steal an instrument from the orchestra, knocking him out.

“Wha—” he exclaimed before he fell.

I turned my attention to my surroundings. It looked like there were mages amongst the ranks of the bandit group too; it wasn't just the leader throwing spells around. *People could die if this gets any worse. It'll be a free-for-all.*

“Charlotte!” I snapped. “How long are you going to just stand there?!”

“M-Master Slowe, I-I...” Charlotte still hadn't caught up to reality, and her brain was having a meltdown from the shock.

I hardened my heart, preparing to say something harsh to snap her out of it. “*This is what battle looks like, Charlotte. If you really want to become my personal retainer, this is the world that you're in for.*”

Terrified screams echoed all over the theater. Charlotte trembled at each and every one.

But she'd told me that she wanted to overcome that weakness of

hers, that she would join me on the battlefield. And so I'd let her come along with me. But the trembling Charlotte before me now wasn't the brave girl from moments ago.

At that precise moment, I felt murderous intent radiating from somewhere, weighing me down from head to toe. It was the overwhelming aura of an extraordinary being with absolute power. The Great Spirit of Wind was surely looking at me, hidden somewhere in the theater.

Whenever Charlotte was involved, that spirit lost all common sense. If she were harmed in any way, they would likely murder me without so much as lifting a finger, and move on to take total control of this place.

We were partners in crime when it came to protecting Charlotte. It took remembering that to snap me out of it. I whispered to the Spirit of Wind in a voice so small, it was barely audible over the din of chaos around us. Even so, I did not doubt that they would definitely hear me clearly, regardless of the distance between us.

"Leave it to me, Altanger!"

The spirit's power was much too crude to set their sights on each individual bandit and selectively aim at them. If I asked them for help, they would need time if they didn't want to catch anyone in the crossfire, and that was time we didn't have. Every single second was too precious to waste right now. Oliver was down, and Sepith headed somewhere with Alicia.

Right at that moment, a bandit shouted down at Borguie from the now-vacant balcony. The leader was still overlooking the whole incident from his position on the stage.

"Master Borguie! The Royal Knight took the princess with him, and anyone who chased after them fell! Everyone's dead!"

Borguie paused, considering this new information. "Do not give chase!" he ordered. "Something is off! We shall deal with our grudge against Cirquista some at the next opportunity! All of you, gather as many valuables as you can carry, finish venting your anger on the people here, and prepare to retreat!"

"Um, you two," came a voice from behind me.

My first instinct was to ignore it, even if there *was* a hint of recognition. *Wait, that voice just now... No.* I shook my head. I had more pressing issues to worry about. *Borguie is still here. Would Alicia really run with her tail between her legs with the nemesis of Cirquistan royalty around?*

No, I decided, she absolutely wouldn't. Even if it meant going against Sepith, she would probably try to claw her way back to the theater no matter what to carry out her judgment. Even if it meant putting her own life on the line, like she had in the anime.

Did Sepith take Alicia away so that he could let her retreat to a safe place? No, that's definitely not the case!!! That guy probably decided that instead of Princess Carina, he'd take Alicia and use her in his plans to defect to the empire!

I hardened my own resolve. I *would* take down that Traitor Royal Knight here in Yoram before he could get the chance to bring disaster to this country.

"M-Master Slowe, what...what should I—"

"Uhh, you two?"

Charlotte hadn't realized yet that Sepith had betrayed us. *What should I do...?* Sepith was as fearsome an enemy as he was as our ally, and *he took Alicia with him*. The bandits were running amok in the theater. Charlotte cowered in fear, and the Great Spirit of Wind couldn't help.

In the past, I would've made the decision in a heartbeat. The blackhearted Piggy Duke had very clear priorities. Between Alicia and Charlotte, I would've definitely picked Charlotte without a second thought. *But now I...!*

"Heeey, you two... You're going to make me sad if you keep ignoring me, you know?"

"What is it with you?! " I snapped. "You've been going on and on for a while! Not only that, but you couldn't keep your noisy mouth shut during the play!"

The rude guy who'd come to the theater at the last second was *still talking*, even calling out to us so cheerfully and casually in this kind of emergency! *Doesn't he understand how precarious the situation is?!* I whirled around to glare at the person behind us. A man with black hair stood there, wearing a white cape loosely draped around his shoulders.

"Hey, dude! That's a good sword yer got there! Why don't you trade with me!" With a face flushed red from what I could only guess was excitement, a bandit leaped at the black-haired man.

A shout of warning was on the tip of my tongue. But before I could get the words out—

Without even turning back, the man with black hair spun the sword in his hand until he held the hilt in a reverse grip. In one smooth motion, he plunged the blade backward, piercing the chest of the bandit with a single strike. The man's grin never faltered for a second, still focused on me.

His brilliant technique, his friendly smile... I was lost for words.

"You do not require any introductions, do you?"

Even with his black hair covering his right eye I recognized that

face right away. I froze. *No matter how many years pass by, I...I could never, ever forget him.* I could never forget the boy who defied all tradition and became an official knight of House Denning despite his commoner origins. The boy who gained my father's trust despite his young age.

I was in complete shock. *What the— Why are you here?*

I didn't have the luxury of time to interrogate him for the answers to all of the questions I had. I forced down all the emotions rioting in my chest. "You. How much do you know about the situation at hand? Tell me," I ordered.

"Sepith cut down Oliver and took Alicia with him. Poor thing; her beautiful dress is ruined. Oliver is loyal to a fault, so Sepith absolutely is the one responsible for the abduction."

"You know enough," I said at length.

"And now a new Royal Knight suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and... Wait, Sir Sepith did *what* to Sir Oliver?! Huh?! Wh-What?!" Charlotte paused in her floundering, her eyes landing on the man beside me. "And why...why are *you* here?!"

Although Charlotte was completely at a loss for what to do, on the bright side, this man's sudden appearance was so shocking that it snapped her out of her panic completely. She was back to her usual self.

Like her, my head was still spinning with a cacophony of emotions, but I calmed myself.

"It is your job as the princess's fiancé to save her, milord," he said.

"Former fiancé, former. She probably doesn't want me at all anymore, but I have to take responsibility for messing up her life. So —"

The Knights of the Twin Wings had once accompanied me everywhere, and now one of them stood before me. It was almost as if he'd jumped straight out of an illusion—straight out of that dream.

...If the cheeky boy from my dream that night grew up into an adult, he would look just like the man before me.

"I'll leave this place to you, Silva," I declared.

"Please leave it to me. After all...I am special, just like Charlotte, your personal retainer."





What?! What did I just see?! What just happened?! I can't believe this is happening! That man struck down his own comrade! The gruesome scene that had happened before Alicia's eyes was deeply ingrained into her mind. She couldn't get the image of the Flower Knight collapsing after being mercilessly struck down right in front of her out of her head.

After that, Sepith had dragged Alicia by her hand and led her away from the theater. Sepith had defeated the bandits chasing them with spells, and he then destroyed the restroom wall located deep in the heart of the second floor. The space behind the thick wall turned out to be hollow, the cavern beyond it deep and dark. Sepith had swept Alicia's legs out from beneath her and carried her as he jumped down into it. The cavity led to an underground passage, labyrinthine with its many twists and turns.

The appearance of the bandits had messed with her heart, but this was just *unreal*. It was almost as if this Sepith was a doppelgänger. He was such a different person that Alicia couldn't think of a better comparison.

The kind Royal Knight she knew him as no longer existed. The man holding her arm with that eerie smile plastered onto his face wasn't anything like the Sepith that had been so considerate to that commoner whose monster he spared. Alicia couldn't fathom how they were the same person.

The time is ripe. He marched on down the darkened path.

"Let go of me!" Alicia cried.

The surrounding darkness was almost a reflection of his own inner darkness. The light from the wooden torches on the wall glowed faintly, just enough to illuminate the path.

Nobody had followed them; he'd made sure of that. He'd murdered all the bandits who chased after the princess.

"Mister Sepith, why in the world would you do such a thing?!"

Ever since he was a child, Sepith always thought that the world was unfair. He had been able to use magic from a young age, but his mother taught him to never, ever use his magic outside their home, no matter what.

Magic was clearly a representation of skill, so his mother's insistence had left Sepith puzzled. *Why shouldn't I use magic?* That nagging question had always been on Sepith's mind.

One day, a messenger from the marquess house came for him. Sepith could remember that day clearly, even now. The people who

had come down from the horse carriage were all seared into his mind. His father, whom Sepith hadn't even known existed, was a noble.

That day, Sepith had made a choice. In exchange for them curing the otherwise incurable disease his mother had come down with, Sepith would become a noble and bring honor to the marquess house.

"Wasn't Mister Oliver your comrade?! And why weren't there any soldiers around in the theater?! Oh, wait... Mister Oliver couldn't possibly have been a spy for those bandits, could he?!"

"Sir Oliver, spying for the enemy?" Sepith spat. "He is the Flower Knight, who chose the country over love. He loved this country more than anyone else. Such a man spying for the enemy? The very thought is ridiculous."

His life in the marquess house had been harsh. There had been many private tutors assigned to him, and Sepith beat the ways of nobility into his own body, pouring his blood, sweat, and tears into his efforts to keep up. Many times, he'd thought to escape. Each time, however, he had stood back up, resolved to endure it all for his mother's sake.

Then, he started attending the mage institute. Sepith was able to use magic with more skill than any other student from the day he enrolled. It was there that he realized his own talent as a mage. That fact probably got to his head a little, and that probably made what happened next even worse.

One day, word got out that he was a bastard, and Sepith became the target of fierce, cruel bullying for daring to show superiority over the nobles with his commoner blood.

"Where are we going? What is this secret passage?! Mister Sepith, where are you heading?! And Borguie is still there! I'm going back to the theater!"

"This passage leads north. Towards the empire, Your Highness."

"N-North?!"

When Sepith had been studying about other countries in this world, he'd learned that in the Dustour Empire, the aristocracy practically didn't exist. It didn't take long before Sepith started admiring it for that.

He spent every single day toiling away at his studies, and then that fateful day came. It was the first snow that year, if he remembered correctly, the day the marquess house had contacted him to inform him about the death of his mother. They hadn't even told him that his mother had taken a turn for the worse. With her passing, Sepith no longer had a reason to live.

Did that man truly do all he could to cure my mother? Doubt slowly turned into hatred within him.

After that, his days were filled with despair, each day piling on

top of the last like a mountain of lead that weighed upon him. And then one day, Sepith was summoned to the headmaster's office. There, the headmaster completely blindsided him.

"Why are you recommending me to the Order? I...I am a bastard."

The headmaster paused. "You must distance yourself from the marquess house. You deeply loathe your father, Marquess Pendragon."

"If you know that much, then...why? I don't love this country at all. Why would someone like me become a Royal Knight?"

"It hurts me deeply to see the doors of your future being shut off, one by one. Never fear. Should you ever betray this country, I shall take responsibility for it, and I shall personally end your life. So Sepith, I ask this of you. Become a Royal Knight."

With the name of Pendragon at his back, Sepith went on to become a Royal Knight, just as the headmaster requested. And one day, a thought occurred to him. *If I betray this country after I gain social standing, wouldn't that deal a fatal blow to the marquess house?*

As if to give credence to that thought, a shady man had appeared before him suddenly and handed him a letter. That letter contained a detailed report on his life, from the time of his birth to the day he received it. It concluded with a request for Sepith's help in uniting the whole continent under the flag of the empire.

In that letter, Sepith found a new purpose in life. Another reason to live.

"A Royal Knight heading north?! Mister Sepith, do you understand how traitorous that is?!"

"I didn't just decide this on the spot. I can assure you it's not a decision I made lightly, Your Highness."

Yes. He'd decided to become the Guardian Knight to realize this dream of his, to betray House Pendragon in the worst possible manner he could imagine. Until *that* day, the path of revenge had seemed the most ideal.

"I remembered what was most important to me," she had said.

"I...also remembered something important to me," he had replied.

Moved by the words of the fair Denning retainer, Sepith realized something important: that revenge against House Pendragon was such a petty thing compared to bringing about the future he wished for.

Charlotte, please allow me to answer the question you asked me that day. You see...my dream was to create a world without boundaries between nobles and commoners.

I will no longer hesitate. There is nothing left for me in this country. I need to take action as soon as possible to realize my dream. Not for the sake of my revenge on the marquess house, but for the unification of the entire continent in the name of the empire, and seeing my ideal world born.

"Wait, Mister Sepith, were you the one who called the bandits

here?!”

“No, Your Highness, I was not. All I did was leak the information about where you’d be. I used them for my own gain. Their hatred for Cirquista is quite formidable. It’s almost funny how smoothly everything played out, honestly.”

Keeping a tight grip on the princess’s thin wrist, Sepith pressed on down the path shrouded in darkness.

Sepith and Alicia were navigating one of the numerous underground passages that wound beneath the city of Yoram. The path Sepith was heading down opened up in an old residential house on the outskirts of town. A representative of the empire was supposedly there waiting for him already.

Though Alicia wasn’t the princess he had originally planned to abduct, she would be a suitable offer to bring back regardless—a good pawn to drive a wedge between the countries in the south.

“The most difficult part of this operation was separating you from the rookie. He’s been incessantly by your side, after all.”

“So you were planning to do this from the very start. That’s why you called me here!”

“At the beginning, I didn’t plan on partaking in such actions. You were my insurance just in case the worst happened, Your Highness.” Sepith paused, shaking his head. “We are nearly at the exit. Please prepare yourself.”

A light illuminated the end of the long, darkened tunnel.
Farewell, my homeland, Daryth.



“You’re despicable!” Alicia yelled.

This is bad... This is bad! Alicia sensed the madness in the man who held her arm in a vice grip, and it sent shivers of fear running down her spine. *I need to get out of here somehow!*

This was completely different from back when she was in danger at the hands of the mercenary. She had her wand now; she was *armed*. She could fight back. But whenever she caught sight of her bloodstained dress, Alicia was reminded of what happened earlier. *Just like Mister Oliver, I could—* Alicia felt chilling fear overtake her, and her will to resist withered away as quickly as it came.

If I’d known it would come to this, I would’ve just gone along with what that guy said. I didn’t catch on to this deeply rooted madness in Sepith at all.

Alicia bit her lip, frustrated with herself. Her hand was sweaty as she gripped her wand. *I am royalty. If I’m going to fall into my enemy’s hands like this, I’d rather—*

Trembling from head to toe, Alicia made a tragic decision. But

before she could act upon it—

Sepith, who had been running in front of her, suddenly stopped. He released her arm without warning and Alicia stumbled to the ground, taken by surprise at the sudden change in momentum. She had bits of gravel in her mouth, scrapes on her cheeks, and cuts on her legs. *That hurt!* Then she heard a familiar voice ringing out from somewhere in the tunnel.

She wasn't imagining things. Alicia lifted her head; even when covered with dirt and dust, the main heroine of *Shuya Marionette* maintained dignity and faced this newcomer.

"Remember how I said Sepith wasn't trustworthy? Yeah, *that's* why."

In the darkness, she could just make out the silhouette of someone leaning against the wall. Her vision blurred over with tears, cruelly depriving her of a clear view of that person.

Are they from the empire? Alicia shot down that thought no sooner than the words had crossed her mind. She had heard his voice clearly, after all, and she knew that voice very well.

She didn't need to question who it was. She would never, ever mistake him for anyone else.

Alicia... Alicia had come to this country because she wanted to talk to him again. It was because of this desire to talk with him to her heart's content that Alicia had continued staying in the same room as him at the inn.

"Leave the rest to me."

A myriad of emotions welled up, and Alicia struggled past them to get the words out. "Yeah. Save me."

Unlike last time, now she was able to convey her feelings with her voice. That alone was enough to make Alicia elated.

In the very next moment, she felt a sharp pain on the back of her neck. With a precise strike of Sepith's hand, the boy's former fiancée quickly succumbed to unconsciousness.



"For a Royal Knight, you're quite the brute." As the boy watched on, his expression contorted, royally ticked off.

"Oh, it's you," Sepith said at length. This boy was a *real* noble who had inherited pure, untainted blood passed down through generations. Though he was a student, he was an elemental master, and he clearly didn't fear what Sepith or Sir Oliver were capable of.

"I'm surprised you figured out that I was going to use this passage. How?"

"I don't owe you an explanation. Hand Alicia over, now."

"Is she that precious to you? Is that because she is your former

fiancée?"

Sepith felt a wind brush past his cheek. Something seemed off, and he reached to feel his cheek. When he pulled his hand away, Sepith's fingers were stained with fresh blood.

"Did you chant when you cast that spell just now, rookie?" Sepith asked.

"If you value your life, *hand Alicia over.*"

Sepith paused. "I see. It's just as Sir Oliver said: your power exceeds that of a normal student by miles. In that case, I shall face you with the respect you deserve."

Sepith laid Alicia gently onto the cold ground, out of the way. He couldn't let Alicia get hurt in any way, for she was his precious offering for the empire. Then he stood back up and stepped towards the boy.

"Allow me to ask you this one question. Did you leave that fair retainer of yours on her own back there?" Sepith asked with a hint of disbelief.

But he received no reply. "Ignoring me, I see," Sepith whispered. Then, he drew his cane sword with every bit of grace expected of a Royal Knight.

With the darkness at his back, the corner of his lips quirked into an unreadable expression. This man, who became the Traitor Knight, just like his alternate future. "I am only bringing the princess to a safe place."

"That's a lie. I already dealt with the people from the empire who were waiting for you upstairs. You were affiliated with those guys of all people, huh? Despite being a Royal Knight?"

Sepith paused in shock. "I'd told them to send people powerful enough to carry out this operation, but you still..."

"What aren't you satisfied with? Why did you decide to betray your homeland right now, and not any other time?"

"My homeland? Daryth, my *homeland*? I regret to inform you that I have never, *ever* loved this country," Sepith spat. "As for why now of all times, well, it is quite rare for foreign royalty to trust me so wholeheartedly. That is reason enough."

"If you defect, the marquess house has no future. You do realize this, don't you? Do you have that much conviction to betray the entire country even knowing that?"

Sepith hesitated. "Originally, I hadn't planned on defecting right now, but talking with a certain someone made me realize something important. With my mother dead, I have nobody that I can turn to. I have no family to protect, and so I must face forward. Just like the person I spoke to, I wanted to live for the sake of realizing my ideals. That is all."

Sepith never intended on telling anyone what he truly thought, and even in the anime, he took his true feelings to his grave. Perhaps Sepith was telling Slowe this as a reward for coming all this way.

However, this short exchange was more than enough for Slowe. With this, he now understood what laid at the core of the Traitor Knight.

“I see... That’s how it is. Your family was the one thing motivating you all this time...”

“Rookie, I know you know that I am a bastard. The way you looked at me wasn’t the way a noble looks at another noble. In your mind, you looked down on me as a bastard just like everyone else did, didn’t you? Compared to a pure-blooded Denning like you, I am nothing more than mere trash to you.”

At that moment, the boy’s face contorted with sadness. He knew everything that happened in the world of *Shuya Marionette*. The Traitor Knight who stood before him was doomed to meet a tragic end.

Though he couldn’t bring himself to like this man one bit...Slowe could only come to one conclusion, after hearing the man’s true feelings.

“Sepith...you are such a pitiful man.”

“I deceived everyone and became a Royal Knight. All of it had been for the sake of this very day, rookie. I acted on my own will. In no way do I want your *pity*.”

“No.” Slowe shook his head. “You don’t know anything, and that ignorance is what brought you here.”

This man before Slowe Denning fought his way through the aristocracy all on his own. Slowe lowered his wand, never once taking his eyes off of Sepith. *This is the only chance I’ll get to tell him this.* Slowe knew everything, and that’s why he felt compelled to tell Sepith the truth.

“Sepith, your mother is alive.”

The moment those words left the boy’s mouth, the Traitor Knight froze, his eyes growing as wide as saucers. The next moment, he glared at the boy with a deadly glare that promised murder.

“Marquess Pendragon kept that promise he made to you.”

If the word “bastard” was Alicia’s trigger to avoid at all costs, any mention of that ill-fated promise was Sepith’s. He couldn’t help but tighten his grip on his cane sword. Sepith forgot to even breathe.

That promise was the reason why Sepith had become a noble—the reason why he'd thrown away everything he had as a commoner. He was left drowning in the memories that surfaced one after another, memories from all the way back on the day when he'd made that life-changing decision to the present.

"How do you..." Those were the only words he was able to force out.

"A member of House Denning cured your mother. Anyone and everyone who holds a high status in House Denning knows this. After all, the famous marquess house owes us one because we did this favor for them."

Sepith couldn't so much as utter a single word.

Slowe hesitated. "There is one thing I don't understand, Sepith. Why didn't you ever return to your hometown after you heard that your beloved mother had died? If you fled from the marquess house and returned to your hometown to visit your mother's grave, you would have realized the truth in an instant."

"...My mother, alive?" Sepith choked out. "You lie."

"Your mother must have put a lot of thought into what was best for your future. Since her son chose to live as a noble, for the sake of his future, she thought it best he didn't contact a commoner like her. With that in mind, your mother requested assistance in faking her death."

"There isn't... You have no proof. Your words are empty, and they hold no weight."

"Where do you think the best water mages in this country are concentrated? Is it in the royal palace? Is it in the Order? No, they're in House Denning. House Denning administers all the military affairs in Daryth, so of course, it's only natural that a variety of talented mages with genuine loyalty to their country gather there. That's why the marquess came to us for help."

Sepith was silent. House Denning was the most powerful noble house in Daryth, and their political power rivaled that of the Daryth royal family. Indeed, if the skilled mages of House Denning were on the task, curing his mother would've been an easy feat.

"Are you going to throw away this country, where your mother is?"

"Did you think that such trifling words would make me falter after I came this far?" Sepith asked at length.

Sepith had thought that he no longer had any attachment to Daryth. But now, he doubted that was truly the case. He hated his father more than anything or anyone else in this world, and yet, why had he just taken his father's words at face value? If Sepith had sought out the truth for himself, even once, he wouldn't be faltering at the

nonsense this rookie was spouting.

“I interrogated the people from the empire upstairs, and I learned how they cracked you. If the empire conquers the whole continent, your ideal world might be realized, that much is true.”

Sepith couldn't find his words for a long while. “Stop it,” he finally croaked.

“Go do what you want, Sepith. If you go on your own, nobody will stop you. Do whatever you please. But—”

“Shut up.”

“—don't drag Alicia into your ambitions. She doesn't have anything to do with this,” Slowe hissed as if Sepith hadn't interrupted.

A long silence stretched between the two of them. What did this silence mean in the end? Nobody knew, not even the two involved.

However, Slowe saw the expression on the man's face when it hardened with conviction. It wasn't the same face as the Traitor Knight in the anime. It was a face Slowe found hard to describe, one overwhelmed with sadness, with anger...a wild concoction of emotions with no outlet.

“Indeed. I have never visited my mother's grave, not even once.”

“Then—”

Sepith cut him off. “I leaked information to the bandit group, and I cut down Sir Oliver. I no longer have any place in this country. The only path left for me is to head north and contribute to the empire's unification of the continent.”

This whole time, Sepith had marched on in the underground passage, completely oblivious to the unforeseen situation unfolding in the theater at that moment.

“I see. Then, I suppose I'll just have to put in a bit of effort to urge you into going home.” The boy approached Sepith. Slowe's instincts told him that this was the only chance for him to lead Sepith down the right path.

Their eyes locked in a battle of glares. The tension was so thick in the air that one could cut it with a knife, goosebumps rising on the flesh of both their arms.

“I will start over in the north. Get out of my way,” Sepith demanded.

“Unfortunately for you, Guardian Knight candidate, this match is already over.”

Binding chains of earth wound over Sepith's feet, earthen tentacles writhing as though they intended to cover his whole body.

Slowe continued. “You never change. Placing your ideals on a pedestal and only looking up, you never see the reality at your feet.”

“You really *are* rather skillful! To think that you could pull off something like this with a wandless spell!” Distracted by the boy's

words, Sepith had let down his guard. *Why hadn't I noticed?! Sir Oliver told me that he summoned a wall of earth with a wandless spell when he faced the mercenary!*

"Do you really think you can stop a Royal Knight with a measly little spell like this?!" Sepith exclaimed. He swung his cane sword in an arc, swathing the blade in a surge of light. The light then transformed into a gale of wind, and frigid air ran down the length of the blade as he swung it down once more.

The bonds of earth shattered.

"Fallen Wind of House Denning! You are nothing but a silly brat who once had the world in your lap and threw it all away! I wouldn't have suffered this much if I'd been in your position!" Sepith yelled.



"As long as there is a wall between nobles and commoners in this country, I belong nowhere! I spent my days in House Pendragon, in the Kirsch Mage Institute, and in the Order, all despite my bastard blood! Those hellish days taught me the truth! As long as this cursed blood runs through my veins, there will never come the day when I am released from the confines of this hell!"

In *Shuya Marionette*, the man before me became the greatest knight in all of Daryth. This man was dead serious. But I had absolutely no intentions of backing down.

The temperature around me plunged sharply. The ground underneath Sepith was covered with frost, and the narrow passage, barely wide enough to fit three people shoulder to shoulder, began to freeze over.

He was creating an arena of ice. My first thought was that this represented the ice in Sepith's heart as he pointed his cane sword at me. But I had nothing to fear. I knew the full extent of the Traitor Knight's abilities like the back of my hand.

"Someone like you, who curses his commoner blood more than anyone, creating an ideal world? Don't make me laugh," I hissed.

"You were born with honor, with talent! You were born with *everything*! How could a swine like you understand how I feel?!"

"Even if you head north, the title of traitor will follow you for the rest of your life. Do you really want to die on that hill?"

"I have always forged my own path, and I will continue to do so! Unlike you, I clawed my way up with nothing but this body!"

I paused. "I see. In that case, there is no reason for us to exchange any more words."

Facing this man in front of me, I hardened my own conviction. I had doubts before, asking myself, *would it really be right for me to interfere with this man's resolve?* But now, I knew that there was only

one thing I must do. I wouldn't hesitate any longer. *I am the only one in this world who can put an end to your curse, Traitor Royal Knight.*

"Slowe Denning, the ultimate symbol of the nobility! I will overcome you and I will go to the north!" Sepith declared.

Charlotte, I've made up my mind.

"Sepith Pendragon," I spat. "For daring to lay your filthy hands on Alicia, I will pass judgment on you."

If anyone dares to hurt someone precious to me... Even if it's not you, Charlotte, I won't let that person off the hook.



"Ice Edge." Spirits invisible to the common man surrounded Sepith's cane sword, leaving the blade awash with a bright blue glow.

The cane sword of the Royal Knights was designed in such a way that its wielder could enchant it with spells. It required much magic ore to produce, the same raw material used in making magical artifacts. The weapon was the culmination of the very best of the Country of Knights' technology and knowledge.

Even in the face of such a weapon, Slowe Denning remained still with his wand at the ready.

I am a Royal Knight, and I excel at melee combat. It is sheer stupidity for a mage to face a Royal Knight in such close quarters. Slowe Denning... Sepith gritted his teeth. *I have felled mages like you countless times before!*

Sepith faced the unmoving boy, whose eyes were fixed on Sepith. The layer of ice on the ground crept towards the boy's feet, and Sepith prepared for his next move.

Sepith shifted into a fighting stance, preparing to draw his blade. "O light, release that which binds my sword..." The pulse of light surging from the cane sword was on an entirely different level compared to when he had used the same spell against the monster in town. The underground passage was flooded with bright, white light.

Even Sepith couldn't see a thing through the blinding light, and he was the one who cast the spell in the first place. There was nowhere for Slowe to run, an advantageous battlefield for Sepith. Sepith swung down his now-enchanted cane sword upon his enemy, unleashing a sword technique used by triple-element masters with all his might. *Farewell, pure-blood. "Aero Slash!"*

The slash of light transformed into an equally deadly blade of wind as it cut down Sepith's enemy, still rooted to their spot because of ice as they were. The combination of a deadly blade technique and a triple-element spell was Sepith's specialty. Nobody could react to such a fatal technique, making their first encounter with it their last. It cut down his foes without fail.

Unable to see the attack coming, Sepith's target split in half as the torso separated from his body and slid down to the ground, turning into a corpse before he even realized what happened.

—Or it would have, if everything had gone according to plan.

Sepith was still blinded with white light. An eerie silence hung heavy over the battlefield even as he struggled to make out anything through the brightness.

The seconds ticked by, and still he didn't hear the distinct sound of a body hitting the ground. Sepith kept his cane sword at the ready so that he could react, no matter what happened next. He understood that his fatal attack hadn't lived up to its name. *So it's your turn now, huh?*

Though Slowe Denning was the direct descendant of House Denning, his ability was still unknown to Sepith. It had been a while since he'd last felt this emotion. Sepith swallowed. *Is this fear I'm feeling?* Even so, Sepith was confident in his abilities. He had trained hard in House Pendragon, in Kirsch, and in the Order. "Even if I can't see, I know what you're doing! I can't count the number of times I've fought mages like you!"

He swung down his cane sword, cutting the incoming spell in half with a single strike. From the feel of it against his blade, Sepith could tell it was a *Flaying Whip of Flames* spell; no sooner had he cut it down, though, than the spell transformed. Scalding heat morphed into frozen air in an instant, and the new spell *Icicle* honed in on Sepith.

One after another, the deadly series of spells assaulted him. Sepith grunted with the effort it took to relentlessly slash, cut, and dice through them all with his cane sword.

The spells' elements changed faster than he could blink, fickle as the whims of a child. It would've been difficult to control several different elements simultaneously so freely as this boy did, even for the most top-class mages in the world. But Sepith himself was a formidable opponent, more extraordinary than those same mages as well. Ensconcing his blade with light, Sepith skillfully smashed and cut down the sphere of earth and the slithering darkness, dealing with each spell as it came.

He didn't even get the chance to breathe; sweat streamed down his face in endless beads. It almost felt as if his arm was one with his sword at this point. The spells Sepith swatted away with his sword techniques struck and gouged the ceiling and walls, heavily damaging the earthen tunnel around them. The shockwaves from the impacts made it feel as if the tunnel itself was vibrating, and yet still Sepith swung on.

This tunnel they were in was very ancient; even natives to Yoram

didn't know it existed. It was a strange relic of the past, worn down by years of neglect. When Sepith had first stepped down into the tunnel, he had roughly estimated how far below ground it ran.

With the amount of force we're throwing around, there should be cracks and deformations all over the place. Sure enough, Sepith looked up from where he was dealing with the boy's spells and spied a large crack in the ceiling. His lips stretched into a thin smile. The boy hadn't noticed the cracks on the walls and ceiling just yet.

The time is ripe. This is the moment that will decide the outcome of our battle. Immediately, Sepith focused all of his power onto the crack on the ceiling. His magic swelled exponentially and he expelled it all at once in an explosion of destructive force, driving it upwards towards the surface. "*Aero Slash!*"

In this location, at this time of day, surely... Please, I beg. Please let there be no one on the surface anywhere around here!

The ceiling crumbled with a deafening rumble. Having lost its foundation of support, an avalanche of earth and sand flooded into the tunnel. Sepith couldn't breathe with all the dust in the air, and he picked Alicia up off the ground and held her close to his body. A yelp of surprise escaped from the boy as he was engulfed in the rubble and vanished from Sepith's line of sight.

Heavy rubble hurtled towards Sepith, and with a burst of wind magic he stopped it in its tracks, leaving it hovering harmlessly above them. Then Sepith unleashed his full power once more, this time for the sole purpose of destruction. Wind erupted from him in such volcanic force that Sepith could ride upon the air, and he shot up onto the surface in a single bound.

"What a catastrophe..." Sepith's mutter rang out in the silence of the night-darkened town. A cool, refreshing breeze brushed past his cheeks.

Other than his own voice, there was only silence in the ruins of the stone district. Just as Sepith had expected, there was nothing more than an aged, abandoned residential district above the tunnel. Sepith scanned his surroundings, checking for the presence of people or groans of pain. There were none. He breathed a sigh of relief.

Sepith sat Alicia down upon a protrusion caused by the tunnel collapse. Beggars couldn't be choosers; it was difficult to get a steady foothold.

Brushing those thoughts aside, Sepith checked his own condition. He had far overexerted himself in terms of magic usage, and fatigue weighed heavily upon his body. He hadn't felt this exhausted in a long time. Sepith probably wouldn't be able to move around like usual for a while. Oh, how he wished he could just pass out like the princess;

that he would even think such a thing was a testament to how heavy and numb his body was.

“The ground shook! What in the world was that sound just now?!”

“Look, the ground over there has collapsed! It’s a fissure in the ground! Keep your distance!”

The shouting grew louder as a few people approached the area. Townsfolk were quickly gathering, one after another, with torches in hand. If Sepith had to guess, he’d say they were probably investigating the earlier racket caused by the shaking and rumbling of the tunnel collapsing.

Sepith turned to the townsfolk and, with the loudest voice he could muster, bellowed, “People of Yoram! My name is Sepith Pendragon, and I am a Royal Knight! I am currently in combat with an assailant from the Dustour Empire! Do not come any closer!”

“It’s a Royal Knight! It’s one of the great white capes!” one of the townsfolk exclaimed with glee.

“Bring the soldiers here! The Knight is wounded! He said he’s fighting with someone from the empire!” another shouted.

No one in this town would dare to question the word of a Royal Knight. He had the white cape adorned upon his shoulders to thank for that. The people of Yoram kept their distance as they were told and raised their voices, calling for soldiers.

As Sepith calmed his breathing, he thought back on the battle. His foe wielded magic with power the likes of which were unthinkable for the common mage. *Not only that, but his ability to change between elements at the drop of a hat...* He’d thought the rumors were said in jest, or to butter up a member of House Denning. He had never thought that a real elemental master existed in this country.

Sepith muttered under his breath, “It’d do me a world of good if that was the end of him...”

“Hey, you!” a voice shouted in indignation. “For a moment, I thought I was really going to die! That was your goal from the very start, wasn’t it?!”

The young boy groaned as he pushed and crawled his way out of the rubble. Seeing the boy appear before him once more, the first emotion Sepith felt wasn’t annoyance; it was *fear*. The boy coughed as he brushed himself off and glared Sepith’s way.

He was completely unscathed. Even in the eyes of Sepith, a Royal Knight, the boy possessed extraordinary power—power even beyond Sepith’s ken.

Silence. Then Sepith spat, “You’re tougher than a roach.”

Slowe laughed. “If you wanted to get rid of me, you’d better bring a Great Spirit or someone on the level of the empire’s Three Musketeers with you, at the very least. I won’t fall to the likes of you.

You don't even have the Mystical Sword on hand."

"You never do learn to keep your mouth shut, brat. Just take a good look around you. Can you really bring yourself to fight against this nation's soldiers, I wonder?"

Soldiers moved to flank the two of them in tight formation, holding deadly weapons at the ready.

"Now! This is our enemy!" Sepith shouted. "He is a powerful foe that even I struggled against up to this point! Lend me your power, everyone!"

The townsfolk glared daggers at the boy. The white cape of the Royal Knight was very effective. Every one of them took Sepith Pendragon's side; to them, he was every bit the handsome knight who protected the young girl nearby.

The ruins were cast aglow with the flickering of orange torchlight, leaving a charged, ominous atmosphere to hang over the usually deserted area.

Once again, Sepith drew his cane sword and pointed it at the boy. He would borrow the power of the soldiers to prevail. Once that boy was out of the picture, the rest would be easy. The soldiers of Yoram wouldn't stand a chance.

It was only once the two of them were fully surrounded by soldiers that Sepith noticed that something was amiss. Though the townsfolk had sided with him...the soldiers clearly had not.

"What are you thinking?!" he shouted in fury. "I am a Royal Knight, a protector of the royal family! How dare you point your swords at me, you impudent...!!!"

The soldiers of Yoram all pointed their blades at Sepith, not the boy who stood to oppose him. Sepith, the *Royal Knight*.



There was a standoff happening amidst the rubble that littered the ground. On one side stood a Royal Knight, and on the other, a boy whom the Royal Knight had declared as an enemy.

"It is treason to point a sword at a Royal Knight! This is outrageous! It must not go on!"

Within the crowd of soldiers, one single young soldier turned to the man who had given the order to point their swords at the white cape. The commanding officer looked to be in his thirties, and a large scar ran across the man's face.

It was ordinarily unthinkable for a new recruit to speak up against a superior officer, but the young soldier couldn't believe his ears when he heard the order to turn their blades on the Royal Knight.

"You're a new recruit who only just joined the army this past spring, eh? State your name," the man ordered.

“Sir, my name is Castoma, assigned to the second unit of the Yoram Security Squadron!”

“Castoma. Are you saying that we should point our swords at that boy, and not at the Royal Knight?”

“P-Pardon my insolence, but yes, sir! The Royal Knight said that the boy is an enemy of this country!”

“You fool. Someone tell the lad who that boy is.”

One of Castoma’s comrades led him by the hand to the front of the crowd. There, the soldier, who couldn’t have had more than a few more years in the army than Castoma, urged him to look at the boy and not the Royal Knight.

Illuminated by the torchlight that cut through the deep darkness, the boy at the center of the standoff had his eyes trained on the Royal Knight. There was a wand in his hand; he was definitely a mage. And he was chubby. The boy stood as still as a statue as he stared square at the Royal Knight. To a new recruit like Castoma, that was all he could gather about the boy.

Then his comrade told Castoma to look at the boy’s wand, not his figure, and ordered Castoma to burn that sight into his skull. Doing as he was told, the new recruit looked at the black wand that stood out against the burning orange of the torches. It was then that Castoma saw the crest embedded on the boy’s wand.

There was no need for further explanation. The new recruit held up his sword with trembling hands and aimed it towards the head of the Royal Knight.

There was a slap on Castoma’s back. “You are a very lucky man.”

Castoma turned to look with only his head, sword point as steady as he could manage. Beside him stood the earlier man with a large scar on his face. Spotting the medal on the man’s chest, Castoma realized that this man was one of the commissioned officers in charge of Yoram.

Castoma hesitated before speaking up. “Um, by chance, is that boy the Fallen Pro—”

“He is from House Denning,” the officer barked. “Do you need more reason than that?”

“...No, sir,” Castoma said. “That’s more than enough.”

“Fighting alongside a member of House Denning is a very rare opportunity for a new recruit in a remote town like this. This will be a good experience for you. Make sure you burn his every move today into your memory.”

“Yes, sir!” Castoma stared at the boy, not daring to even blink.

The people who were truly putting their lives on the line for their country weren’t the Royal Knights; it was the people of House Denning. Everyone in this country knew this—from a commissioned

officer of the military down to a lowly new recruit like himself. And it was because Castoma became a soldier that he saw that truth with his own eyes, and he took it to heart.

The truth was that that boy was definitely aiming his black wand at the enemy, there was no mistaking it. Even if it meant drawing his sword on a protector of the royal family...Castoma couldn't ever turn his blade on a member of House Denning.



"I repeat, my name is Sepith Pendragon! Why are you soldiers opposing a guardian of the royal family?!"

He'd miscalculated. Sepith hadn't counted on the soldiers pointing their weapons at him instead. He didn't expect that the power of House Denning would hold such sway even in a remote town like this.

More and more soldiers joined their ranks. From one hundred to two hundred, and the number kept growing. Sepith was flanked by enemies on all sides. Now, he didn't have the luxury of time to wait to recover from his fatigue.

"The soldiers don't seem like they intend on interfering. I owe them one. The soldiers of Yoram have keen eyes, or some highly skilled officers stationed here, at the very least."

Sepith stared back at the boy in silence.

The boy continued, "Now then, let's settle this once and for all, Traitor Knight."

Who are you, Slowe Denning? Aren't you supposed to be the Fallen Prodigy of Wind? The good-for-nothing exception to House Denning's excellence? Despite being born to House Denning, you've never had experience on the battlefield, and you've never fought your way out of dangerous situations against all odds. How are you able to act so assertively in front of a Royal Knight and all these people?

Almost as if the boy was showing off his unwavering self-confidence, he smiled at Sepith.

A primal fear rose up in Sepith at the absurd amount of magic being conjured, and he almost recoiled back a step. *A spell...is coming.*

But he stopped himself just short of actually doing so. He would not take a single step back. Retreat was worse than defeat. No matter what spell next came his way, he would cut it down. Sepith Pendragon held up his cane sword, determined not to falter, no matter what happened.

"You should be honored, Sepith. This is the spell of the man who saved the world."

Sepith felt neither disdain nor anxiety at those words. Even if Sepith was exhausted, he would deal with what came his way. After all, he had envisioned endless possibilities of how this could play out

in hopes that he could change the tides of battle.

“The beginning of the chant is this: *Enkindle.*”

Oliver had countered Borguie’s spell with a *Flaying Whip of Flames* spell, but the roaring fire that manifested now was on an entirely different level. The surrounding soldiers and spectating townsfolk all dropped their jaws in a stupor, looking up in awe of such destructive flames.

The mystical inferno blazed with such an overpowering intensity that it eclipsed part of the sky. All who witnessed it were deeply moved by the sight. *This* was a spell of House Denning, the noble house that stood at the highest echelons of the nation’s army.

“*O fires of creation, become one with my arm. Rampaging Heat.*”

To those who were in the know, the spell was obviously a fraction of Shuya Newkern’s power—an incarnation of power of the man who would go on to save the world with the Great Spirit of Fire.

Almost like a reenactment of the anime, the boy swung his right arm down towards Sepith, directing the churning inferno that encircled it towards him.

The colossal mass of flames approached. Perhaps out of a sense of rivalry, Sepith chose to retaliate with an offensive spell and not a protective barrier. He wanted nothing more than to get in at least one good hit on the privileged pure-blood. Perhaps the spirits humored him because of that strong yearning—

“Spirits, lend me your power... *O light, release that which binds my sword!*”

He channeled the very last ounce of power he had left in him, and with a single slash, he split the incoming explosion of heat in two.

Immediately, the arc of light transformed into an arc of wind and dove towards the boy.

It was at that precise moment that Sepith noticed something. One of the branches of the flames he’d split in two rebounded towards the girl still lying prone amidst the rubble. Swiftly, Sepith manifested a barrier of water. *It won’t make it in time*, he realized.

Sepith did not hesitate; on instinct, he leaped towards the girl.

The flames, hungry for prey, wound around Sepith’s cane sword and burned their way up Sepith’s right arm, leaving it mangled and charred to a crisp. He didn’t mourn the loss of his limb.

“You’re really something, to be able to cut through that spell,” Slowe muttered. “Still, that was a surprise.”

From the very beginning, when his fatal technique did not strike true down in the tunnel, Sepith’s defeat was all but set in stone. The rest was just his stubborn nature doing the talking. Perhaps there had been a chance to grasp the key to victory back in that tunnel. Sepith

knew that miracles happened sometimes on the battlefield.

But Sepith's will was long broken. The outcome of this battle was decided before it had even begun.

Sepith had lived in the shadows of society due to his identity as a bastard, and he survived up until this day without trusting anyone. His accumulated experience told him that the boy only told the truth. There was no reason for a person of such power to lie in the first place.

It was all true... His mother was *alive*.

He no longer had any reason to fight. He could only blame himself, for he had chosen to never return to his hometown.

"I didn't think you would protect Alicia."

"Ah... So I hit you after all."

The boy wasn't completely unscathed. There was a horizontal tear on his shirt. Sepith had managed to land a single, glancing blow on the boy. But that was all. The boy's body remained whole, not cleaved in two as he intended. He looked as if he could keep fighting without breaking a sweat.

"If you'd had the Mystical Sword, the symbol of the Guardian Knight, I wouldn't have been able to stop that last strike of yours," the boy said.

The cane sword fell onto the ground with a clang. Sepith didn't even have enough strength left to hold his sword. He forced a wry smile. He couldn't imagine becoming the Guardian Knight and protecting the princess in the future, considering what he'd done. That future was far beyond his grasp.

This boy was from House Denning, a powerful, pure-blooded house that sometimes passed judgment on fellow nobles. Surely, then...there was nobody better suited to execute a man like Sepith.

"Save the useless questions. Deal the last blow," Sepith said.

"Yeah. I planned on it."

Sepith closed his eyes and slowly exhaled. He'd been proud of his own abilities, of the techniques he'd polished to protect the royal family. But if that strike didn't work against the boy, Sepith had no choice but to concede.

Not only that, but if his mother was truly alive, then...Sepith couldn't possibly betray the country where his mother lived.

Sepith groaned in pain as something pierced straight through his chest. Judging by the feel of it, it was likely his familiar cane sword. *The partner that cut down countless people before now would cut me down in the end, huh?* He almost laughed at the irony. *It's only appropriate. I am an enemy of the royal family right now.*

Surrounded by a crowd of strangers watching his last moments, Sepith felt his strength leave him.

The soldiers and the citizens of the country he'd tried to betray, seeing him off instead of friends and family... This was a fitting end for a traitor like Sepith Pendragon.

"Do you have any last words, Sepith?"

I do. You're the Fallen Prodigy of Wind, are you not? So what's with that power of yours? Is your power born of a life spent in the throes of battle, where your heart had no reprieve? Is that how it is?

And I honestly didn't think that her master would be the one to see me off. It was Charlotte who made me steel my resolve, and it was her master who stopped me. Oh, the irony. There were too many words he wanted to say.

But if he had to pick just one statement—

The Traitor Knight struggled to keep conscious, what with the blood pouring out of him. It wasn't flashbacks of his beloved mother in his memories, nor was it resentment towards the blasted pure-blooded boy at the forefront of his mind. It wasn't contempt or regret either.

"Is the theater—"

"The real star of the show is taking care of it. Don't worry."

Sepith was quiet for a long time.

"Thank you."

Saying nothing more, Sepith Pendragon collapsed on the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

Within him, there was relief and shock. Relief that he didn't succeed in becoming an enemy of his mother, not in the true sense of the word. And shock at himself, for the fact that he prioritized a childish wish over his ideals: the wish to not be the one who made his mother sad.

Huh. Surprisingly, it looks like I'm not such a grand person after all. To be honest, he didn't know why he had once strived for such lofty goals.

Thank you, boy. Though I have no intentions of telling you this, I'm really glad that I met you.

A crimson flower blossomed on the cold ground. All the while, the Prodigy of Wind glared at the pitiful traitor with indignation.



Over at the Theater La Cuvelier, everyone was in shock.

After a certain someone had appeared, the tide of the battle completely turned in the blink of an eye. At this point, nobody even bothered trying to escape, and all eyes glued to the show on the stage. What once had been a play was now truly happening, and the continuation of the scene was almost godly.

"Lo and behold, I am a strong man today. I've never felt better in

my life, as a matter of fact.”

“Go away! Don’t come any closer! Someone stop him!” the bandit leader screamed.

Only a short while ago, the stage was depicting the meeting of a princess and a commoner swordsman. And now, two men fought for real upon the stage that entertained hundreds of guests. Everyone in the hall watched the youth dance across the stage with bated breath.

The outcome of the battle was clear, however. Borguie’s spell was torn to shreds with a graceful glide of the blade, and—

“Who *are* you?!” Borguie shouted.

“Well, unfortunately, I don’t have a name glorious ’nuff to declare. I’m a commoner, you see.”

“A *commoner*?! Don’t lie! Your techniques are those of a knight’s!”

The man with black hair clearly had the upper hand in this one-sided match. Backed into a corner, Borguie’s expression slid past anxious and melted straight into deathly pale territory. The man was way too strong. You could count the number of swordsmen of his caliber with one hand, even in Cirquista.

Every step forward the man took was like the inevitable approach of a god of death, and Borguie felt every hair on his whole body stand on end. This man’s mysterious sword techniques tore his magic apart, and Borguie scanned the man desperately for a clue as to his identity.

His eyes landed on the crest of Daryth etched on the blade.

Finally, Borguie realized who he was facing.

“The Mystical Sword?! Then, you must be... No way! *No way!* The Guardi—”

“I don’t like that name. I may be wearing this white cape, but I’ll always think of myself as one half of the Knights of the Twin Wings, whether it be in the past or in the present, ya know?”

“The Knights of the Twin Wings?! Then, you are that Pro—”

Borguie never got the chance to finish his sentence. The man thrust his sword into the bandit’s chest, and the man who’d disguised himself as the armored warrior collapsed in a heap on the ground. Just like that, Borguie met a pathetic end.

The bandit group could scarcely believe that their leader had fallen so easily, and they all stood rooted to the spot. The man had murdered Cirquistan royalty, and he had escaped the clutches of the powerful Cirquistan army. He’d boasted that he could easily keep two Royal Knights in check, and yet he was defeated without so much as a fight. How?

“Oh yeah, something like this happened when I first met the young lord too, if I remember right,” the man muttered before turning to face the hall. “Hey, you filthy thieves. If you don’t want to end up like this guy, you’d better stay still.” The man cackled and continued,

“Why is that, you ask?”

The swordsman on the stage pointed his sword towards the bandits who were trying to hightail it out of the theater.

“If you move, I’ll make your head kiss your body goodbye with a single slash. Think that’s impossible? Well, well! Not with this sword, it’s not!”

Almost as if to back up the young man’s words, the mysterious sword suddenly began to glow brighter.

However, moments after that, Silva muttered this: “Ah well. Looks like I didn’t have to say that. The main troops are finally here.”

The doors of the theater slammed wide open, and a group of men adorned with white capes advanced into the hall in an impeccable, orderly fashion.

The Order of Royal Knights, the pride of Daryth, had arrived.

Final Chapter: Conviction of Love

Now that my battle with Sepith was over, I could finally breathe a sigh of relief. He'd been stronger than I thought. Unlike the Sepith in the anime, he wasn't the Guardian Knight. Because of that, he didn't have the Mystical Sword, one of Daryth's national treasures. I honestly thought that would make him an easy opponent.

Who would have thought that he'd try to bury me alive by bringing the tunnel down on top of me? To be honest, that actually had me a little flustered.

Inwardly, I heaved a heavy sigh. Fatigue weighed heavily on me as I looked at my surroundings, which had taken the brunt of our battle.

The ground had protrusions and pockmarks all over the place. The ruins of the residential district that surrounded us were almost ghostly with dust that hung thick in the air. *It's almost as if zombies or something equally creepy could pop out of the ground at any given moment.* Although the district appeared to be no longer in use, it would still take quite a long time to repair all of the damage done to this place. *It's not my fault that this place ended up in such a terrible state, though. It's all because Sepith went wild.*

"Don't come closer! Leave this area!" A large group of soldiers raised both their torches and their voices, ordering the townsfolk to leave.

Among the numerous soldiers, I singled out one in particular to talk to. I'd seen him somewhere before. It was a man of tall stature in his thirties, one who had a glamorous medal etched with a lion on his chest. A large scar ran across his face. *He's given orders to a lot of different soldiers here, so this guy is probably one of the commanders. A commissioned officer, if I had to guess.*

"Thanks for leaving us to our own devices. It helped me out a lot."

"Let me extend thanks of my own. Thanks to you, I didn't need to ask my subordinates to make any unnecessary sacrifices. Though we have a few mages among our ranks, against Royal Knights, they would've..." The guy trailed off. "Still, that spell you overwhelmed the traitor with was splendid. Your prowess in magic is awe-inspiring, both when you healed me that day and with that spell earlier."

"It is the duty of those of us in House Denning to take down the enemy. Plus, magic is the only thing that I can think of saying I'm

talented at,” I said with a shrug.

“You are too humble, young master. Not only did you rescue the Cirquistan princess, but it is also thanks to you that I was able to recover so swiftly and return to my job after the incident with that monster. No matter what happened in your past, it doesn’t change the fact that I am indebted to you.”

“You realized who I am?”

“Anyone who’s been in the army long enough will remember the faces of the Dennings.” The man took a look around and changed the topic. “Still, who would have thought that such a place existed under the town? And for people connected to Dustour to know of it...”

Soldiers brought a group of men groaning in pain out of one of the old residences and tied them up. These men were the agents of Dustour who had been in contact with Sepith.

The moment those Dustour guys saw me, they yelped in fear.

I had searched every nook and cranny of town after the day Alicia had accepted Sepith’s proposed plan, and that hard work bore fruit. The tunnels beneath Yoram made up a secret maze that had been used in the anime too, and I’d happened to find a path lit with fresh torches on the walls.

After I left the theater for Silva to deal with, I searched around and confirmed that Sepith had headed towards the tunnels. I then took a shortcut to wait for him at his destination.

I’d been sure that the suspicious path I’d discovered in my search was the one Sepith would use, and I’d headed to the old house in the residential district, which I had scouted out beforehand. I’d found a few people of the empire loitering around there, and so I’d interrogated them very thoroughly and made them cough up the truth about Sepith. *Those were some fun times indeed.*

“Young master, the Order headed to the theater. The cardinal is currently there as well. Please leave taking care of this place to us and head there to meet with the rest.”

“Hmm. I guess I’ll do that. Ah, I’m sure you know this, but please hand that Royal Knight over to the Order. They’ll decide what to do with him.”

“Understood!”

The soldiers squared their expressions and each gave me a full salute. Such a display was unthinkable for a normal student.

But the Denning crest was etched into the black wand in my hand. I needed only to show them this symbol and soldiers would immediately change their attitude and follow my every order.

How do I put it...? They reacted to me as if I were their commander in chief or a hero they admired. I felt like a pig caught in the headlights under the weight of those soldiers’ admiring gazes upon my

back. Feeling rather awkward, I decided to call out to Alicia, who still seemed to be in a daze after coming to.

Basking in the glow of the evening sun, Yoram was abuzz with commotion. Normally, the town was peaceful, and big incidents were almost unheard of in the sleepy town. Today, however, soldiers ran about the town in a rush.

“The Order of Royal Knights has come!”

“Those people aren’t from Daryth, they’re from Cirquista! They’re a group of outsiders who escaped from Cirquista to Yoram!”

This was all because of Sepith. That dunderhead was probably still unconscious.

“Silva came along with the Order! He’s the top contender to become the Guardian Knight, you know! The rumor that a commoner was involved in the Guardian Selection was true!”

Even now, turmoil churned in my chest. The expression on that guy’s face and the words he spoke during our last conversation were completely different from that of the anime Sepith. I honestly didn’t expect the one who would’ve become the Traitor Guardian Knight in another timeline to worry about the state of the theater.

“That’s the Mystical Sword of Light! So they really *did* give the national treasure to a commoner!”

“Times are changing, everyone! The next Guardian Knight is a commoner!”

And those last words of his... *What exactly was he thanking me for?*

“Hey, would you *listen* to me already, Alicia?” Pushing those thoughts aside, I looked towards the princess from our allied country. Her splendid dress that I’d admired earlier was torn and tattered, and displeasure radiated off of her in waves. I could feel that even though she had her back turned to me.

We stood in the central street which led to the heart of the town. Even though she walked with her head hung, her nobility still shone through. Her sullied dress didn’t tarnish her beautiful looks at all, and in fact, it served only to contrast and highlight her overwhelming beauty.

Many curious eyes fell on her, all wondering what had happened to the girl. A good portion of the bystanders walking down this street stopped in their tracks to stare at Alicia. And it wasn’t just the men either; people of every age and all genders stopped and stared.

Part of Alicia’s ire was probably because of her exposure to the nosy crowd.

“You were just unlucky,” I reasoned. “Someone was bound to draw the short straw eventually, and that someone ended up being

you.”

“Spare me your pathetic attempts at sympathy. I’m in the worst mood right now.”

I didn’t even need to guess why she was so upset. She’d trusted Sepith with all her heart, and he’d repaid her trust by nearly selling her off as a bargaining chip. In the time she’d spent with Sepith before I rescued her, she’d probably realized how deep the madness ran under Sepith’s facade, judging by her reaction.

Her face was all crunched up in her misery. She had refused to utter so much as a single word since she regained consciousness, and that backed up my theory.

She growled. “I can’t forgive him. I’m considering kicking him with all my strength one more time.”

“Bad idea. If you cause him any further pain, he might actually depart this world for good.”

“That’d be a small consequence, considering what he did. Does that guy even know who he tried taking advantage of?!”

I hesitated, carefully choosing my next words. “The Order will probably make a formal apology to you later. The cardinal himself might make time for you to do just that. Holding a debt over one of the top leaders of the country is pretty wild.”

“Ugh, I don’t feel up to that. What am I supposed to say to the cardinal? All by myself, no less. Nobody knows what’s going on in the mind of Daryth’s cardinal, and he’s pretty scary.”

“Huh.” I raised an eyebrow at her. “So even someone like you has fears.”

“What do you even think I am?” Alicia muttered grumpily. She walked on in silence for a moment before she stopped and whirled around, pointing a finger towards my forehead. “More importantly! Only terrible things have happened to me ever since you started trying to lose weight.”

Taken as a hostage by No Face, then being betrayed by a Royal Knight... True, she was unlucky, but what did I have to do with any of that?

And in the case of the Traitor Knight, she was just reaping the seeds she had sown. I *had* kept trying to stop her all the way up until the last minute, just before we headed for the theater. *But she’s probably not thinking straight right now, so if I told her that, we’d only end up arguing.*

“So you’re saying it’s *my* fault?”

“I mean...” She trailed off. “It’s just so unfair!”

Her calling it “unfair” was unfair in and of itself, but in truth, her statement might have been spot on.

If everything had gone according to the anime, no one would have attempted to kidnap Alicia and sell her off to the north. It was my interference that had gotten Alicia thrown into terrible, life-threatening situations twice now, despite it being prior to the events that happened in the anime timeline.

The royal beauty had always been protected back in her home country; both of these incidents were probably unbearable for her.

"I did save you both times, though," I muttered at length.

"That's... Well...I-I guess..."

Shuya and Alicia were the main characters of the anime; perhaps Alicia being dragged into trouble just came with the territory. Perhaps all this meant that they would become key players even in my own story.

"Huh? Stand still for a minute," she demanded.

"What is this, out of the blue?"

"Just as I thought, you're different," Alicia said as she scrutinized me. "Piggy Slowe, did you do anything special today?"

"I beat Sepith into a pulp and rescued you."

"No, not that. I'm talking about your weight. Somehow, you seem much slimmer than yesterday."

"Slimmer? Really?"

"You're completely different... Your figure is firmer than usual, and your build seems a bit more sturdy too."

"Maybe it's because I chugged a lot of Charlotte's weight-loss potion before I went to the theater. I haven't been drinking it lately, so that's the only difference. If you want to lose weight too, I'll share it with you, Alicia. There's still half left."

"I'm fine, thanks. If I drink something like that, it'll make me sick or something."

Still...Charlotte's specially brewed weight-loss potion, huh?

I couldn't tell the difference myself, but according to Alicia I'd lost weight, and rapidly at that. It sounded silly. I hadn't even gone on my morning jog the past two days because of the operation. If anything, I'd been eating more than usual, making up excuses that I needed to accumulate strength before heading off to the theater. In exchange for my feast, however, Charlotte forced a large amount of that potion down my throat. *Hmm, I guess I'll have to check myself in the mirror when I get back.*

Alicia sighed. "Ugh, this is the worst... But it's true that you saved me, so..."

"What is it? You're muttering stuff under your breath," I said.

"Come on, Alicia. Let's go."

"Oh, shut up. I need to brace myself for something like this, you

know.”

“Brace yourself?”

“Yeah.” Alicia lowered her head at me.

H-Huh? Wh-What?

I didn’t see this coming at all. Just a few days ago, she was shouting curses and hurling insults at me, dumping all of her emotions onto me. I couldn’t believe the same girl was bowing her head at me.

“Whoa, hold up. I only did what anyone else would do in my position. If anything, I should be the one apologizing as a citizen of Daryth, since you experienced such a stressful situation here.”

“But I won’t be satisfied unless I do what I ought to,” Alicia declared without a shadow of a doubt.

Right. Alicia is that type of girl. If someone was in the wrong, Alicia was a noble girl who would call them out on it, even if they were above her station. That was why she ended up with a pure and honest person like Shuya. Sometimes, she’d show her strong will and sense of justice and it’d make me wonder where she got all that energy from, considering how small and frail she was.

Just like that, the main heroine of *Shuya Marionette* bowed with her natural-born grace towards me, her former fiancé and sworn enemy.

“Okay, I’m ready now,” she whispered.

Ready? For what? But I didn’t get the chance to voice my question.

When she lifted her head, her expression was completely different from the usual sour look on her face. There was a dust of pink on her cheeks, and she looked a little embarrassed.

With the full moon above her, the princess from the beautiful Metropolis of Water—

“Thanks...for saving me!” Alicia said, and she beamed.

I was blown away by her smile. It was nearly enough to make me forget my battle with Sepith. Her smile was so cute that it made me think coming to this town was worth it, if it meant going through all of this just to see it.

I couldn’t utter a single word.

The smile of the main heroine captivated many of the viewers; it was just that cute. I thought that her smile wouldn’t ever be directed towards anyone other than the would-be anime protagonist. Especially not towards *me*, a scorned human on a one-way track to becoming a pig. I never thought she’d smile at me in my entire lifetime.

This... This is a fearsome ambush.

“Why aren’t you looking my way?! You just received a thank-you from yours truly! It’s a very, very rare honor!”

“Sh-Shut up!” I stammered. “Why would you care?!”

“Huh?! Look at me!”

My heart took a critical hit from her smile. It felt as if someone had grabbed my heart and squeezed it hard. *This is probably the charm that captivated many of the anime characters, huh?*

That reminded me. Once upon a time, Silva had said that Alicia would definitely grow up into a beauty, so he was jealous of me for being engaged to her. His prediction was absolutely right.

Alicia probably sensed my embarrassment, having felt the full brunt of the smile she had apparently poured all of her heart into, and she marched right up to me. She peered up at my face from below and said, “Come on, lift your chin already.”

Ugh, one moment she’s acting all noble and dignified, but the next moment, she starts teasing me. I’m not one to take things lying down, though!

“Just joking,” I muttered.

“Huh?”

I lifted my head and pointed my wand towards the girl who was unfortunate enough to become the main heroine of *Shuya Marionette*.

Nearly a thousand years ago, during an age spoken of only in myths, magic hadn’t yet been split into the six elements.

The woman we dubbed the “Founder of Magic” had borrowed the power of beings called spirits, and, according to legend, she could perform just about any feat the people of her time could imagine.

Commoners in Daryth seemed to think that we nobles became omnipotent beings after going through advanced magical training, but that was a huge misconception. For example, a fire mage could only use fire spells, a water mage could only use water spells, and so on. Compared to those ancient days, modern mages were very limited in what we could do.

That was why, on the rare occasion a mage had the aptitude for more than one element, they were given special treatment. If a commoner were able to awaken several elements, they wouldn’t stop at just being *treated* as a noble, they might even officially earn a noble title. Magic was a lot more versatile when you could work with several elements.

“Did you do this?” Alicia asked at length, looking down at herself.

“Well, it would be pretty sad to leave you in that miserable state, and it might even tarnish my honor walking next to you like that, so yeah,” I said with a shrug.

To illustrate my previous point...I’d used a triple-element spell of wind, water, and earth. Though I couldn’t return the dress to brand-new, it was a huge difference compared to how tattered the dress was

up to this point. This mystical power was something very few people besides myself could pull off. I shouldn't have used it for something as trivial as this on principle, but I decided I'd make an exception, given everything that had happened today.

"You should have done this earlier. How embarrassed do you think I was, walking in such a state?"

"I also needed to brace myself, since you're like an entirely different person when you're dressed up all pretty. There's nothing more difficult than dealing with that, you know."

Alicia paused. "What do you mean?"

"I'm saying that you're way prettier than the actress who played the princess."

"Just what do...you..." Alicia trailed off. "Huh? Me...?"

Alicia went stiff as a board, as if she didn't understand the words coming out of my mouth.

I paid no attention to the wind spirit near me whispering, "Is this infidelity? Are you cheating?" It was better to give such compliments directly; that was a secret to success I'd learned as a kid. Besides, Alicia was probably used to people waxing poetry about her. It wasn't a big deal.

But wait. *Huh?*

Alicia cupped her cheeks, as if to hide how her face had grown red. "Wh-Wh-Wh...What? Y-You...Wh-What did you just say?"

"I said that you are very pretty."

"P-Pretty? Wh-What's w-with that...?"

Was what I said really weird enough for her to react like that? Even though she was used to hearing compliments like that, her face was almost as red as her dress.

My former fiancée looked utterly defenseless, something I couldn't imagine with her considering how she usually cursed me with her sharp tongue. She was kind of cute like this.

Compliments from someone she loathes so much must be so unexpected that it left her in a stupor. Or something like that. If I had it my way, I'd have stayed there and watched, but I needed to get back to the theater as soon as possible and check on Charlotte.

Thus, I briskly walked past Alicia's frozen form, muttering to her in an offhand tone, "Come on, let's go. You're a hundred years too early to be teasing me."

If we continued staring at each other like that, I might've ended up all red myself. I walked on, prepared to leave it at that.

But then—

"D-Don't you dare try to act all cool. You're still just a damned pig!!!"

"Ow!" I yelped, feeling something heavy hit the back of my head.

I looked down. One of her high-heels sat there on the ground, toppled over where it landed.

Ow, that hurt. I'll probably have a big lump on my head now. But for some reason, I was reluctant to heal this injury with a water spell.

In the end, we started walking slowly towards the theater, side by side, but we didn't look at each other the whole time.



Alicia leaned against the cool exterior wall of the theater and quietly watched the black-haired swordsman from afar.

"That's Silva! That's the commoner who's the top candidate to become the next Guardian Knight!" a man in the crowd shouted.

"Listen to this: he shook my hand! Yes, that's the gentleman they based *Mayhem of the Blade* on!"

After the commoner swordsman appeared, the atmosphere in the theater had completely changed in the presence of such a celebrity. On top of that, the Order had stormed the theater and immediately subdued the bandits. Or so Alicia had heard.

Still, it's been a while since I last saw that man. He looks quite mature. How old is he now? Alicia started counting his age on her fingers. *I'm sixteen, so he's probably just past his mid-twenties. Oh, he is an adult now.* Alicia nodded to herself.

"Just as I thought, you really *have* lost quite a bit of weight, milord! Ha ha, when I last saw you, you were like the child of an orc! You've really changed!" the swordsman at the center exclaimed.

When she was young, the older boy who'd often played with her on Denning lands was unreadable. As a child, Alicia had wondered who that boy was. She knew better now; that boy was one of the two knights specifically chosen to protect that guy in the past. The commoner was named Silva, and he was one half of the Knights of the Twin Wings.

Now he was a candidate to become a hero. He donned a white cape, and that man waved towards his former master.

"I heard that you'd started taking things seriously and had come to Yoram, milord, so I couldn't help myself. I left the Order in the dust and came straight here!"

"*Hey!* There are way too many people around you! Why are you more popular than me?!" the boy whined in reply. The man was bombarded by people from all sides. The crowd's roaring excitement still hadn't died down either, it seemed.

He's very popular. I guess he'd have to be, considering that it's unheard of for a commoner to enter the Guardian Selection. Alicia shrugged.

"Your Highness, it is nearly time."

“Please let me stay here for just a little longer, Mister Oliver,” Alicia replied.

“...Understood, Your Highness.”

Alicia had finished dealing with the rush of people headed her way, the Flower Knight at her side the whole time.

A Royal Knight apt at water magic healed Oliver’s wounds from Sepith, so Oliver was able to return to active duty right away. Even though Alicia was a water mage herself, she couldn’t have healed such a serious wound this quickly. The Order lived up to their fame with such great talent in their ranks.

After the Flower Knight recovered enough to move around, he refused to budge from Alicia’s side. This was his job, he said, and he wouldn’t be persuaded otherwise.

There was a sense of melancholy lacing his features. Even when Alicia asked him about Sepith, the man held his tongue.

Once Alicia left this area, she had a meeting scheduled with Cardinal Maldini, at the landlord of Yoram’s home. But even with the current circumstances, Alicia didn’t think she’d be able to bring up any complaints with the infamous cardinal. She would probably just end up signing some kind of documents, going along with whatever the man said.

Ugh, troublesome. That was her honest reaction.

“Ha ha, well, I’m a white cape now, that’s why.”

“I appreciate your help earlier, but nobody cares about what you’re doing with your life now! More importantly, Charlotte! Where is Charlotte?!”

Sick of all the matchmaking meetings for a politically arranged marriage, Alicia had begged her parents to let her have freedom for a while. She’d struck while the iron was hot and pressed on further, saying that she wanted to go to the Kirsch Mage Institute in Daryth. Though she had initially told her parents that she wanted to do so to broaden her horizons, they ended up wresting the truth from her.

“I haven’t settled my relationship with him. That’s all.”

Her parents relented after that, having even encouraged her to go.

She was given three years, the amount of time it would take to attend and graduate from the Kirsch Mage Institute. It was more than she could’ve ever asked for, and she couldn’t believe her ears when they’d first told her that.

Her parents had probably also latched on to what they remembered of the boy they had seen in the past, just as she had.

After all, he had been the Prodigy of Wind once, the one who was said to be the future of the Country of Knights. Even now, Alicia found her eyes glued to the boy’s every movement. The same went for the Flower Knight standing next to her.

“Mister Oliver, may I ask you something?”

“Anything, Your Highness.”

“Would you have been able to capture the man known as Sepith Pendragon without sustaining any injuries on your part?”

The Flower Knight's silence was more than enough of an answer for Alicia. *Even for such a famed knight as the Flower Knight, the Traitor Knight is a foe of deadly prowess, huh?*

However, the guy still shouting and looking for Charlotte had managed to accomplish such a feat. He was able to defeat a Royal Knight so nonchalantly, even going as far as acting as if nothing had happened after such a heated battle.

This wasn't even the first time he had shown unbelievable power. First the mercenary, then the Traitor Knight...

Both times, Alicia had thought that she had nobody to help her, but that guy had realized that she was asking for help. Out of everyone, he was the only one who did.

Whenever the boy met Alicia's eyes back at Kirsch, he had always looked to somewhere far away, like he was looking *past* her and not *at* her. But on that day, and then again just now, he looked *at* Alicia, and with the same kind gaze he had given her once upon a time.

“There you are, Charlotte! Are you hurt anywhere?! Are you okay?!” The boy rushed over to Charlotte, examining her head to toe for injury.

And that gaze was enough to make Alicia remember one thing vividly: the reason she had been enthralled with him in the first place.

He had been the only one who looked past her royal status and treated her as just Alicia. He scolded her when she did something wrong, argued with her over trivial things, and he even shared wild fruit from the forest with her.

All of it had been so *new* to Alicia. He was the first person who treated Alicia as an equal.

“Wait, what's that wand?! Huh? You picked it up?! The spoils of war?!” The boy's voice carried over the din. “Listen to yourself! You can't do that!”

“Milord, Charlotte also defeated one of the thieves. But, well, she still can't control her spells...” Silva trailed off, then seemed to chuckle with a myriad of suppressed emotions. “Seriously, I didn't think I'd meet you two again like this... Today really is a great day...”

Looking back, that had been such a simple reason. She was almost like a newborn chick imprinting on a parent, what with how she clung to him. But when she was a child...such a small reason was enough to send her over the moon, like he was the one saving grace in her life.

Realizing this wasn't a groundbreaking discovery.

Alicia pretended that she hadn't realized the truth all this time. The real reason why she had come all the way to the mage school in this country...was because she stubbornly believed that one day, the boy from the past would return. After all, her dreams always had one thing in common: they were all her memories of him from her childhood.

Alicia heaved a heavy sigh. She didn't know why, but that boy had indeed returned.

The boy once dubbed "the human orc" no longer existed. He was now a person who lived up to his status as a direct descendant of House Denning. If you had to grasp for fault, you could point out his chubby figure, but... *He seems to have lost even more weight than ever before, though.*

Alicia would know; she'd been living under the same roof as him since she came to Yoram. She wanted to get closer to him and confirm the truth for herself. *But in the end, it's too mortifying to approach him of my own volition...*

"Is something bothering you, Your Highness?"

"It's nothing," Alicia muttered at length.

There was an engagement ring adorned with crimson and azure in her pocket. Alice felt the hard surface beneath her fingertips. It had been crafted specifically with the colors associated with House Denning and Cirquistan royalty.

"Haaah..."

Once again, she let out a long, deep sigh. In contrast to her sigh, however, her face was full of joy, almost as if a burden she'd carried for many years was finally lifted from her shoulders.

The reasons for that? Well...

Firstly, from the bottom of her heart, she was glad that she had come to Daryth—to Kirsch.

Secondly, she realized that the crush from her childhood was never going to end. If anything, it seemed that it'd been reignited.

"The hero arrives at long last. Maldini, it seems that we no longer need the Guardian Selection."

Yoram was still in an uproar over the visit of the Order of Royal Knights.

Landowners of the surrounding areas and influential nobles alike gathered at the landlord's house beside the clock tower in the center of town.

There, a single girl stepped down from a horse carriage as knights of the Order attended to her. Her rose-gold locks fluttered in the breeze, giving her a divine look like that of a goddess. Her drowsy

face was arguably her most attractive feature, which stood out starkly in contrast to such beauty.

Beside her stood Royal Knight Commander Johannes Maldini, the one said to be secretly pulling the strings behind the Country of Knights. This girl, who the cardinal served under, was none other than Carina Little Daryth herself, the Divine Light of Daryth.

“A major country that lacks heroes will only fall into decline.” That was what you always said. Well, this is a good turn of events for you. There is a contender for that hero now. His background shouldn’t be a problem, considering you set an example when you put Sepith’s name forward before.”

The Royal Knight Commander nodded silently to the princess’s words. He didn’t have it in him to dispute that. After all, Maldini had been the one who insisted that Sepith Pendragon should enter the Guardian Selection despite the princess’s objections.

The princess turned to face the surrounding people and addressed them. “Everyone, I would like to take this opportunity to make myself clear.”

The Royal Knights all dropped to one knee with the exception of Oliver, who was guarding Alicia. The words of the crown princess were akin to the law of the nation.

“I do not care about family standing, nor about what happened in one’s past.”

The world currently stood at the precipice of an unprecedented war lying in wait. Their enemy was clear: the Dustour Empire in the north. The empire possessed three magnificent heroes whose names would indisputably leave a large mark on history. The superpower in the north watched like a hawk, biding their time for an opportunity to invade the south and unite the entire continent.

To combat the ambition of the empire, the four major countries in the south formed an alliance. Among the Great Southern Alliance, Daryth’s influence had plummeted in recent years, causing endless grief for the country.

The reason for this decline was simple: Daryth didn’t have a hero grand enough to become a symbol of their country.

“No matter how problematic a person’s personality may be, if they have the aptitude to become a hero, then—”

That was why in the anime, a certain boy with extraordinary power had been placed on the pedestal as the savior of the world. Shuya Newkern went on to forge his path to world salvation with the Great Spirit of Fire, Eldred, in the anime *Shuya Marionette*.

Right now, this savior of the south known as the Fiery Diviner still

hadn't shown any sign of his awakening. Fate waited for nobody, however, and it started turning its gears, moving towards what events rightfully determined this world.

“Even if this means war with House Denning...I choose him as my Guardian Knight.”

A storm was coming. An incident of unprecedented scale was just around the corner, ready to rattle the continent.



Afterword

The world of show business never calms down.

I often see the words “retirement” or “leaving to lead a religious life” making headlines on television as of late. Though the entertainment industry seems really glorious on the surface, the people there probably suffer through immense hardships in the shadows, huh? It must be very painful... I watch the talk shows and imagine what they must be going through. My heart goes out to them. (It’s fun to watch.)

The Country of Knights where our Piggy Duke lives also has a pretty stifling social hierarchy with the aristocracy, but right now it’s the mage institute at the center of the story. On top of that, our protagonist hails from an immensely powerful noble house which makes him privileged and special, so he’s doing whatever he pleases. However, that makes me wonder... If the Piggy Duke had to deal with a real aristocratic society, would he also want to leave the mundane world to pursue religion after being crushed by others’ political power?

These thoughts make me want to write a carefree rom-com story set in the 21st century. But I like stories where the protagonist rises up. What would happen if I combined a school setting and a rise-to-glory plot? Let’s see...

The scorned character turns out to be the son of the board chairman. Or something like that. Wait, they’d still be scorned in a scenario like that.

The scorned character turns out to be a good person. Hmm, that’s very clichéd.

A character who is mocked as a fatty or obese turns out to be a real orc and not a human. Why would an orc be in a school in Japan? Wait, how about, they turn out to be a monster sent from another world or something? I’m only confusing myself, so I’ll scrap that.

A thrilling rom-com set in a school... I guess the best thing would probably be a normal student enrolling in a special school of some sort. It’s a classic trope, but this is definitely the most exciting. Classics are powerful.

Now that the second volume of *Piggy Duke* has ended, it’s time for the story to kick into high gear.

Most of the students right now keep Piggy Duke at arm's length. The problem student at school suddenly shows off his super strong powers, and they're all left shaken, thinking, "What in the world was *that*?!" or "Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god." But now it's about time that they start thinking, "Huh? Wait, that guy changed for real?" about our protagonist's shift. There might be more people starting to show him the respect that a member of House Denning deserves, and more people asking him for help.

On top of that, I think it's about time for the anime protagonist to start trying his best to make his presence known in this tale too.

Shuya is the type of protagonist that's more traditional in Japan. Because of this, he might stress about his own decisions, and he might even seem a little pathetic as he mopes about things. In *Shuya Marionette*, where he is the main protagonist, he always has Alicia by his side, but...who knows what is going to happen in the Piggy Duke's story?

He's practically nonexistent at the moment, so I want him to work hard and make his presence known in this story like the protagonist (well, of the anime) that he is!

See you again!

Rhythm Aida
(Published April 20, 2017)

A detailed illustration of the character Alicia Bulla Dia Cirquista. She is a young girl with short blonde hair and large purple eyes, wearing a red dress with a white collar and a blue bow. She is holding a black wand in her right hand. The background features a circular pattern with text like 'the wind breeze' and 'spirit of'.

2

Alicia Bulla Dia Cirquista

The second princess of Cirquista,
the Metropolis of Water.
Slowe's former fiancée.

Reincarnated
as the **Piggy Duke**

*This Time I'm Gonna ♡
Tell Her How I Feel!*



"I am
still but an
inexperienced
novice among
the Royal
Knights."

"This letter
is addressed
to you from
the Cardinal...
He formally
requests that you
participate in
the Guardian
Selection."

Sepith Pendragon

A Royal Knight of Daryth,
the Country of Knights.
A bastard with the mixed blood
of a noble and a commoner.

Headmaster Morozov

The headmaster of Kirsch Mage Institute.
He spares no effort, day and night,
to protect the students' peaceful lives.

"It is the will of
the royal family.
Nobody in this
country can go
against that."

Slowe Denning

The protagonist who reincarnated
into the world of his favorite anime.
The third son of House Denning,
and a problem student of Kirsch Mage
Institute. At least, he used to be...

"Th-That's
impossible!"



**“I wonder
what happened
between Lady
Alicia and
Lord Denning
in the past.”**

Tina

Slowe's adorable
underclassman.
She uses earth magic,
an uncommon feat
for a commoner.

**“I don't
know the
details,
either...”**

Charlotte Lily Huzak

The princess of the once-great
kingdom of Huzak, now destroyed..
Currently Slowe's retainer, a far
cry from her former royal position.



However, whenever
Alicia stuck her hand into
her pocket... Whenever
she felt the cold surface of
the engagement ring, she
decided she'd try her best to
talk to him, but in the end,
she never did muster up
the courage to do it.

The mystical inferno blazed with such an overpowering intensity that it eclipsed part of the sky. All who witnessed it were deeply moved by the sight. This was a spell of House Denning, the noble house that stood at the highest echelons of the nation's army.

"You should be honored. This is the spell of the man who saved the world."



Translator's Notes

Welcome back to another edition of Weird Trivia. I'm Zihan, the translator for *Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke*! I'd like to share some background about some of the more obscure terms we had to localize, so let's jump right into it!

Prologue: Our Past, Our Future

To wear/put on a pig

When Professor Loco Moco talked about how Slowe had put on an act, Loco Moco described Slowe by saying *buta wo kaburu* ("to put on a pig"), which is a play on the expression *neko wo kaburu* ("to put on a cat"). This phrase in Japanese means someone or something hiding their true nature behind an innocent or obedient facade.

This comparison to a cat is said to have stemmed from the fact that cats look cute, lazy and calm on the outside, when in reality, they have razor-sharp claws and can be vicious when hunting down prey. This phrase best translates to the English expression "a wolf in sheep's clothing," as it's used in a similar (but not exactly the same) context.

There is another theory (albeit a slightly less popular one) that this saying came from a shortened version of *nekoza wo kaburu* ("to put on a woven straw blanket"). In this case, it refers to wearing a *nekoza* (the woven straw blanket) over your head to hide your identity.

Chapter 1: A Gift from the Cardinal

Kusatte mo tai (“Even the rotten apple doesn’t fall far from the tree”)

The original Japanese text used a paraphrase of the idiom, *kusatte mo tai* (“even if it’s rotten, it’s still sea bream”). Slowe says that even if he’s rotten, he’s still a Denning. The original phrase was used to describe how something with value still retained some value even when in bad condition or in unfavorable circumstances.

Back in ye olde days, mimicking the practices of China, Japan used to consider carp the highest grade of fish. However, starting from the Edo period (1603-1867), the sea bream took its place due to its beautiful color and delightful taste. It was commonly used in celebratory meals, and grilled sea bream were used as decorations called the *kakedai* during New Year’s for luck.

The phrase *kusatte mo tai* actually originates from the *kakedai*. The grilled sea bream would be taken down after New Year’s for use in soups and stews. Sea bream is still edible even if it’s a little stale, and on the surface, the grilled fish doesn’t change much even after being hung for a few days. It still very much retains its value, and thus, this idiom was born.

Chiyahoya (“fawning over/making a fuss over”)

Shuya taunts Valjean that he was pretty popular with the commoners lately using the word *chiyahoya* (“fawning over/making a fuss over”). This word derives from the saying *chou yo hana yo* (“like butterflies and flowers”), which means to bring up one’s child like a princess, making sure they are happy at all times. It is often used with girls, though it can be used for all children. The child is compared to butterflies and flowers; they are beautiful and delicate things that must be treated with lots of care and love.

The original phrase was a quote from Empress Consort Teishi in *The Pillow Book* by Sei Shonagon. Everyone in court turned their attention from Teishi towards Empress Fujiwara no Shoshi when she entered the harem, and Teishi compares Empress Shoshi to *hana ya cho ya* (“flowers and butterflies”). It illustrated how Sei was the only one who knew her true feelings, while everyone else gathered around whoever was the most influential at the time, fussing over Empress Shoshi to gain her attention and favor.

The quote slowly changed over time to *chou ya hana ya* in the Edo period, which was later shortened to *chiyahoya*. *Chou ya hana ya* then became *chou yo hana yo* in the Meiji period, and is still used today.

***Seibai* (“to pay for their actions”)**

Slowe cautions Alicia against going to Yoram, and he rhetorically asks her whether she really thinks a girl like her could make the bandits pay. The word used here is *seibai*, which derives from the *Goseibai Shikimoku* (“Formulary of Adjudications”), the legal code for the Kamakura shogunate.

After the Kamakura shogunate was established in 1185, eastern Japan mostly fell under the rule of the shogunate, while western Japan was mostly ruled by the Imperial Court. After the Jokyu War, however, most of Japan fell under the Kamakura shogunate’s rule, and the power of the Imperial Court was greatly restricted.

At the time, the Kamakura shogunate didn’t have statutory law, and they mostly passed judgment in trials based on the precedents and morals of the samurai. However, this expansion of territory caused more and more problems due to the differing local laws and customs. Thus, the *Goseibai Shikimoku* was born as a set of legal codes for the military government, which became the primary ruling political power in Japan after the establishment of the Kamakura shogunate.

The word *seibai* in this document meant “to do good and to defeat evil”; in modern times, it is used to refer to someone or something punishing evil-doers.

Chapter 2: The Insurmountable Wall Between the Formerly Betrothed

NG word

When Slowe talks to Alicia, he accidentally uses a trigger word for her. In Japanese, this is called an NG word; NG literally stands for “no good”, and in this case, is referring to a bad word. NG itself is used specifically in the media and can refer to a variety of things.

One such meaning is when words should be avoided for the sake of political correctness, as Alicia demonstrates here. On sites like niconico, there is actually an NG filter function that mutes comments that have certain words in them, so that you don’t have to read anything offensive.

Another usage of NG is when referring to deleted scenes in movies, or bloopers—scenes that didn’t make the cut. When used in reference to live television, however, it’s generally used in the negative sense where there’s a technical problem or incident that can’t be edited out since it’s live footage.

Chapter 3: The Small Resolution of a Girl Who Falls Short

***Hanninmae* (“one who falls short”)**

This word was used to describe Charlotte in the title of chapter three. Literally meaning, “half a man’s worth,” this word is used in two ways: first, when you order half of a portion that serves one person; and second, when describing someone lacking the skills, usually technical skills, to be called a fully fledged professional of some sort, and are therefore only worth “half” a professional in their occupation.

Afterword

Retiring from show business for religion

Rhythm Aida mentions someone retiring from show business in the afterword. Considering the time the book was published, this is very likely referring to the case of Fumika Shimizu, a Japanese actress, gravure idol, and model. She announced her temporary retirement for religious purposes around February 2017. The religious group she was associated with is classified as a cult. She later returned to the entertainment world under a company founded by the cult she belongs to.

There is a specific word used in Japanese media when referring to people who seclude themselves from the mundane world for religion. This word, *shukke*, literally translates to “leaving your home.” It usually refers to a Buddhist rite known as *Pabbajjā*, where a person goes to live among a community of ordained monks. (It’s difficult to say whether the cult is exactly Buddhist or not. Whether this word truly applies in this case we can only speculate, but that’s the word the cult and the media used.)

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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke: This Time I'm Gonna Tell Her
How I Feel! Volume 2
by Shouji Gatou

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Edited by Ori Starling

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